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THE BIBLE IS FOR YOU

by Dr. Stuart E. Rosenberg

This book shows how the Bible can be for all of us a continuing source of self-understanding — emotional, intellectual and spiritual.

To many of us, the Bible remains what it was to us as children — a series of stories, or tales. To others, it seems simply a mine to be quarried by the scholar, the student of comparative religion.

It is the aim of Dr. Rosenberg to show us how the Bible is more than literature, more than a record of the law and culture of an ancient world. It is his aim to show how the Bible is, above all, a library of books devoted to and concerned with religious teaching, teaching that has relevance for us all when fully and personally understood.

When we seek to experience the word of the Bible as participants in a moral and religious drama, and not merely as observers of an ancient record, Scripture comes alive in intensely meaningful ways. Through this fresh approach to the Bible, Dr. Rosenberg transforms

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“Scripture speaks in the language of men.”

—The Babylonian Talmud

“Revelation does not deal with the mystery of God, but with the life of man. And it deals with the life of man as that which can and should be lived in the face of the mystery of God . . .”

—MARTIN BUBER

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The Bible Is for You

OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGE RECONSIDERED

by

STUART E. ROSENBERG



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BOOKS BY STUART E. ROSENBERG

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Man Is Free

The Jewish Community in Rochester

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Contents

Introduction	ix
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PART ONE: *The Hebrew Bible*

1	What Is the Bible?	3
2	Translations and Commentaries	15
3	The Bible's Influence	35
4	Modern Aids to Bible Study	47
5	Theology and Psychology	65

PART TWO: *Tales for Adults*

6	The Greatest Art	85
7	The Moral Punch Line	92
8	These Are the Names	107
9	Fathers and Sons	120
10	Brothers	129
11	The Failure of Success	138
12	Endings That Are Beginnings	154
	Selected Bibliography	173

Introduction

IN THE Bible, without doubt, are history and tale; proverb and enigma, correction and wisdom; knowledge and entreaty, prayer, praise and every kind of supplication; and all this in a Divine way superior to all the prolix benedictions in human books, to say nothing of its containing in its depths the Names of the Holy One, blessed is He, and secrets of being without end.”¹

This attempt at a pithy summary of what is in the Bible by a sixteenth-century Venetian rabbi is as noble as it is succinct. But succinctness will not do. The Bible has been described in myriads of places and times, always it defies final and ultimate description. Historians seek to discover clues to ancient times in its lines; anthropologists look for origins of customs and taboos in its pages, theologians scan its words and their nuances for significant religious messages. Archaeologists, etymologists, philosophers, educators, and a mixed variety of other seekers after knowledge may be added to an unending list.

Despite all this, the Hebrew Bible, in our day, remains a closed book for most average adults. They recognize its value as a religious textbook for children, and often encourage their young ones to learn well its “tales.” Few of them, however, get to know the Bible as a source of knowledge about human nature, as a resource for a better understanding of

¹ Solomon ben Isaac Halevi, quoted in *The People and the Book*, ed. Arthur S. Peake (New York: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 430.

The Bible Is for You

themselves. The Bible thus survives today at the edges of two extremes: as a book of religious instruction for children, and as a mine to be quarried by the technician—the scholar-specialist. The average man, however, has precious little contact with it in an intimate, existentialist fashion.

It is the intention of this volume to help to close that gap. It will be necessary to interpret to the nonprofessional reader something of what the scholars have discovered. For without such knowledge we are denied entry into a fascinating world—the ever-expanding territory of an intelligently reconstructed past.

Over and above this, however, there will be an attempt to deal with a series of Bible stories and events in an adult fashion, to help those who have never outgrown their childish understanding of these “tales” to seek in them a brighter and more searching light. Only when the Bible is made to speak to us in language and spirit nearer to our mature understanding can it become personally relevant.

For unless it does communicate itself to us as fully grown persons, it cannot achieve its fundamental purpose. The Bible is more than history, more than literature, more than the law and the culture of an ancient world. Above all, it is a library of books devoted to, and concerned with, religious teaching. When we seek to experience the word of the Bible as participants in a moral and religious drama, and not merely as observers of an ancient record, it comes alive in a personal and relevant way. When it enters our lives as a quickening and vivifying spirit, when we convert its words into our own spiritual substance, Scripture is transformed into something altogether new. It is no longer *the Bible*. It is *our Bible*.

It is the author's hope that after you have read the pages which follow you will come to feel that *the Bible is for you!*

PART ONE

The Hebrew Bible

What Is the Bible?

FIRST things first. Before we can enter into discussion of what the Bible is saying to us, we should know something about what it is. In an unbroken chain of tradition it has come down to us, lovingly cared for, preserved, pondered and translated into virtually every human tongue.

Yet we take it so much for granted that we fail to realize how poorly the literature written during the same period of time by the nations surrounding Israel has fared. The writings of Mesopotamia remained buried under the dusty ruins of half-forgotten cities—Ur of the Chaldees, Nineveh and Babylon. Only the spade of recent excavators could bring the libraries of Babylonia, in the form of clay tablets, to life again, and then only for the student of antiquities. But, while the Epic of Gilgamesh remains a modern curiosity offering a small window on the remote past, the story of Noah and his ark had long, long before entered into the mainstream of western culture, because the Hebrew Bible had been carefully and devotedly preserved.

The Bible Is for You

Even the cultural treasures of Egypt—preserved in its dry, open sunlight—continue to be regarded as alien and esoteric relics of an older day. For men had forgotten how to read the language of the people of the Nile, and not until a century ago was a linguistic key discovered to unlock the code. Obviously, whatever was great and valuable in that literature could not have had any impact upon the growth of civilization. Today, only the rare student—the Egyptologist, as he is called—has direct access to its teachings and insights.

Most ironical of all was the complete eclipse of the language and culture of a civilization most nearly related in time and place to that of Israel. The Canaanitish cult and culture is just now coming to light as a result of the deciphering of tablets found in Ras Shamra, on the coast of Syria. These tablets reveal something of the immediate context of ancient Israel. The language is Semitic, the figures of speech and word-pictures are sharply similar, and much of the polytheism which Biblical authors denounce is clearly portrayed and described. But Canaan and its customs have been known to the world until now only by reason of their mention in the Bible. Had not these Ras Shamra tablets been unearthed but scant decades ago, no further word of Canaan's strivings would have been heard.

The remarkable thing, of course, is that the Bible, alone among the literatures of ancient cultures, survived the silt of time's deluge. It was not buried in the ruins of the ages, nor covered by the sands of history. It emerged from antiquity as the lone, protected record of the earlier epochs. How, in the face of man's normal forgetfulness of the past, could this miracle of history have occurred?

What Is the Bible?

When one understands who were responsible for the protected position which the Bible achieved, and why they acted as they did, the interesting story begins to unfold.

The men of ancient Israel who were responsible for the editing and the authoring of Scripture viewed their task in a way quite dissimilar from their contemporary counterparts. They believed that what they wrote or gathered together derived from the one true God who had entered into a special covenant with their people, Israel. This pact—*b'rit*—had specific terms of reference: God loved and protected Israel because Israel worshiped no other God but Him, and voluntarily agreed to follow His Law. Some modern historians may have difficulty accepting such a viewpoint as the basis for an objective study of the Hebrew Bible. One suggests that the modern “must seek—behind the religious terminology—the same kind of documented human story, with an examination of its underlying dynamics, that would be his proper objective in any other field.” Otherwise, he goes on to caution, we would lose its objective significance and the Bible would become nothing more “than a compilation of myths, chronicles, annals, oracles, autobiographies, court histories, personal apologia.”¹

And yet, unless one does take this special religious factor into serious account, one loses the very touchstone by which the unbroken tradition of the Bible must be measured. For, if those who had preserved Scripture—the people of Israel—had approached this literature with the puristic, objective, and detached attitudes now called for, undoubtedly there would have been no Bible in our hands today. On the con-

¹ Harry Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1946), p. 9.

The Bible Is for You

trary, only because the Bible was kept as a holy book, its language preserved as a holy language, the land of its birth regarded as the Holy Land, its significant sites as holy places, and the history it records understood as sacred and redemptive (*heilsgeschichte*), has it come down to us, if not completely intact, then surely as the most comprehensive summary of the culture of a people ever to be safeguarded by so many, for so long.

This acceptance of Scripture as sacred history saved the Bible from oblivion. And in the process it preserved the image of ancient heroes whose impact upon our world would have been lost had their existence been merely regarded as historically and not spiritually significant. Had the people of Israel, for example, insisted upon scientific evidence for the historicity of Moses, and, failing to uncover indisputable testimony of this, rejected his teachings, they would have relegated him to the scrap heap of history. Too often, in our eagerness to accept the resurrected past only in the light of literal truths, we reject as fable all but the visible and the obvious. Ironically, however, in our desire to be *realistic*, we overlook the *real* forces which shaped human history.

We may unearth a piece of ancient pottery and find thereon the signature of "Simeon," a certain Hebrew who put his name to his watercup. This, we will aver, "proves" the true and real existence of Simeon. But what else does it prove? Who was he? What influence did he wield? We may be very certain that he had a past. But did he have a future? On the other hand, we may continue to fail in attempts to verify the actual existence of Moses, or to dig up the remains of the tablets containing the "Ten Words." Does such repeated failure signify that Moses was not real?

What Is the Bible?

Far from it. Moses remained a real person because he appeared as a real person in the Bible. Had he merely been recorded in some secular journal or royal archive, his biography would have been slurred over by history. The Bible, however, endowed him with the qualities of a living hero, not because he was more than a man, but only because as a man he served God's cause and spoke His word. The significance of Moses lies in the fact that he molded the shape of spiritual history. This is why the Bible takes the trouble to tell us so much about his life. And this is why, though we may never succeed in "proving" his existence historically, he remains more real for us, and more known to us, than the Simeon whose signature the historians require as scientific evidence of his real existence. Historical positivists—those whose strictly limited truths must be capable of scientific proof—often succeed in remembering the wrong things. Yet history, in spite of the historians, has forgotten Simeon. It does remember Moses, indeed it cannot forget him, because the people of Israel, who preserved the Bible, verified and vivified his existence in spiritual, not in scientific, terms.

To be sure, it is not always possible, nor even desirable, that modern man adopt the views of those who preceded him. Even if we devoutly hoped to be carbon copies of the past, we could not; the past eludes us, even defies strict emulation. Yet, if we are to savor the truest taste of what the past was when it was a present, we must seek to understand it on its own terms, not merely on our own. Not to do so results in one of two unwise extremes: either we read yesterday superficially, seeing it only as the primitive reflection of our primitive selves and, not liking what we see, reject it; or we come to the past with the smart-alecky sagacity which measures

The Bible Is for You

everything according to neatly prearranged laws of history—laws, by the way, which do not necessarily reflect what has happened, but only what we think *ought* to have happened.

In a moment, we will see how broad a canvas was used by the Biblical authors to paint their verbal pictures—as broad as life itself. There are sagas of families, biographies of heroes, proverbs, chronicles, poems, prophecies, philosophical tracts, a novellette, love songs and a verse-play in the Hebrew Bible. But arching over and running through them like a silver cord is the central, crucial theme: God in the life of man. We may come to understand what these authors meant by this theme in ways which are closer to our “universe of discourse”—our own language and world of thought. But always, for the Bible to be truly understood, we must relate ourselves to its central theme as adults. For none of these elements in the broad-ranging contents of the Bible, so far as we know, were written by children, and none of its tales were specifically intended by their authors to be scrutinized or analyzed by experts. They were written *by* adults *for* adults. We should read and confront them *as* adults!

A Table of Contents

Before venturing further, we should become familiar with the Hebrew Bible’s “table of contents,” learn how the text was fixed—or canonized—and see, as well, how it came to be preserved in its present form.

The Bible is divided into three parts: the Law, or Pentateuch (also called the Five Books of Moses.); the Prophets, earlier and later, major and minor; and the general miscellany,

What Is the Bible?

called the Writings, or Hagiographa. The books are thirty-nine in number, a veritable library, and their titles follow:

I. <i>Pentateuch</i>	II. <i>The Prophets</i>	III. <i>The Writings</i>
Genesis	(Earlier)	Psalms
Exodus	Joshua	Proverbs
Leviticus	Judges	Job
Numbers	I Samuel	Song of Songs
Deuteronomy	II Samuel	Ruth
	I Kings	Lamentations
	II Kings	Ecclesiastes
	(Later)	Esther
	<i>Major Prophets</i>	Daniel
	Isaiah	Ezra
	Jeremiah	Nehemiah
	Ezekiel	I Chronicles
	<i>Minor Prophets</i>	II Chronicles
	Hosea	
	Joel	
	Amos	
	Obadiah	
	Jonah	
	Micah	
	Nahum	
	Habakkuk	
	Zephaniah	
	Haggai	
	Zechariah	
	Malachi	

The canonization of the Law probably was completed sometime around the time of Ezra (440 B.C.E.). Some two hun-

The Bible Is for You

dred years later, the books of the earlier and later prophets were accepted into the canon. And at a convention of rabbis in the city of Jamnia, the books comprising the Writings were accepted as scriptural, about the year 100 of the Christian era.

The principle behind canonization was "divine inspiration"—whether or not the books contained God's word and were therefore worthy of being regarded as sacred. As far as the Pentateuch was concerned, there could be little question; the real author of these five books, it was believed, was God,—Moses was merely his mouthpiece. True, the prophets were the spokesmen of God, too, but they were regarded as expounders of the law, and not in the same class as Moses. This explains why at least one of the prophets—Ezekiel—had difficulty in gaining entry to the canon; his book contained some statements which could not easily be harmonized with the Law.

When it came to the Writings, there was even greater difficulty. Many books which were regarded by the people as sacred did not receive the official sanction of the rabbis. The problem turned on the question of "divine inspiration." If a book was believed to have been written before "divine inspiration" had ceased to be revealed unto men, it was judged sacred; if later, it was deemed unacceptable. Many of those which never made their way into Hebrew Scripture were labeled "Apocrypha" ("hidden"—from the ordinary reader) by the Church which did accept them as being part of the Old Testament. This literature is often called the intertestamentary writing because it bridges the gap between the Old and New Testaments. Martin Luther, however, accepted only the Hebrew canon as the word of God and rejected the Apocrypha, referring to them as "books that are not

What Is the Bible?

equally esteemed with the Holy Scripture, but nevertheless are profitable and good to read." At the Council of Trent, in 1546, the Roman Catholic Church clearly defined its position in opposition to Luther, accepting the Apocrypha among the books of the Old Testament in these words: "If any man does not accept as sacred and canonical these books, entire, with all their parts, as they have customarily been read in the Catholic Church and are contained in the ancient common Latin edition . . . let him be anathema!" In effect, then, Protestants as well as Jews regard only those books listed above as part of the Hebrew Scripture, while Roman Catholics accept the apocryphal writings in addition.

Soon after the final canonization of the Hebrew Bible at Jamnia, efforts were stepped up by the Jewish community to establish a standardized, authoritative text. There had existed, until this time, a number of copies of each book, and in some respects the texts of these manuscripts varied, one from another. Spurred on by the Talmudic teachers, the job of establishing correct and uniform spelling and the caring for the sacred text was left to the elementary schoolmasters who taught the younger children. This building of an official "received Text," called in Hebrew the *Masorah*, was the careful, reverent and loving work of these humbler scholars and it resulted in the preservation of the text and its protection from the intrusion of later errors or innovations. After the Hebrew, this is called the Masoretic Text.

In the case of the New Testament there is an abundance of available manuscripts, which, though they differ widely in their wording, have at least enabled scholars to reconstruct a picture which leads back to the oldest and most original versions. But the Masoretic practice of faithfully recopying

The Bible Is for You

the text with meticulous care and accuracy has curiously been an obstacle in the way of students of the Hebrew Bible. In the first place there were, until the Dead Sea discoveries, no manuscripts older than the ninth Christian century. What is more, except in very minor details, they were all exactly alike—the Masoretic copyists saw to that.

Thus, scholars of Hebrew Scriptures, seeking to reconstruct the oldest forms of the text—the pre-Masoretic versions—have had to turn to ancient translations—the Greek, Aramaic, Syrian, and Latin. Since these translations, as we shall soon see, were made between the third century B.C.E. and the fifth century C.E., they were obviously based upon Hebrew manuscripts that were much older than any of those which have come down to us. Yet even this attempt is fraught with danger since it is not always possible to be certain that the translation of the original Hebrew words into another language was either accurate or faithful to the original.

All of which explains the real significance of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls—those widely trumpeted, but little-understood ancient Hebrew manuscripts found in caves near the Dead Sea, beginning in 1947. Many popular claims about them have been advanced: it has been suggested that they provide the missing links between Judaism and Christianity; that they reveal the Jewish prototype and forerunner of Jesus and thus detract from the originality of the Nazarene; that they come from the very community in which John the Baptist taught; that they are the work of the Jewish sect, the Essenes, known to us before only by the descriptions of Philo, Josephus and Pliny the Elder. Thus far, however, responsible scholarship has in no way accepted such claims, for more careful work remains to be done. To date, the most that can

What Is the Bible?

authoritatively be learned from these scrolls is summed up in the words of one scholar: "Herein lies its chief importance, *supporting the fidelity of the Masoretic tradition.*"²

This value of the scrolls is, however, no less dramatic. Now for the first time we have the texts of various books of the Hebrew Bible (and still others, contemporary with, but not included in, the canon) which go back several hundred years before those which were in the possession of scholars until this time. The Masoretic text in our hands goes back only to the second Christian century, and there are always scholarly doubts about material that is so far removed from the period of its production. "Considering how widely the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament vary," says Millar Burrows, "how radically the ancient Greek versions differ from the traditional Hebrew text, and what a long time intervened between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the oldest of medieval manuscripts, one might have expected a much larger number of variant readings and a much wider degree of divergence. It is a matter for wonder that through something like a thousand years, the text underwent so little revision."³

The Masoretic text emerges, then, as a highly reliable version of the original. The Dead Sea Scrolls—which are pre-Masoretic—lend scientific evidence to the spiritual fidelity, the painstaking concern of those to whom the copying of Scripture was a religious act, not a secretarial or professional chore.

The text was reverently preserved because it was considered to be "divine revelation." Indeed, had these ancient Jews

² Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 304.

³ *Ibid.*

The Bible Is for You

viewed their classical literature as only the glowing product of their own "culture," or merely as the reflection of their national "literary genius," the Bible, like many other records of antiquity, might have been lost for all time. Because they believed it to be the word of the ever-living God, it survived.

Translations and Commentaries

IN THE synagogue of today, each week a different portion of the Pentateuch is read aloud in the form of cantillation, so that, in the course of a year, the congregation is instructed in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Similarly, on Sabbaths and festivals, selected sections of the prophets are recited; the books of Ecclesiastes, Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth and Lamentations are read in their entirety on special occasions. Precisely when this custom which made the reading of Scripture an integral part of synagogue liturgy took shape is not known. Tradition has it that it goes back to the time of Ezra, who observed the forgetfulness of the Law among his people in the first dispersion in Babylonia, and determined, upon their return from captivity, to re-educate them in the law and lore of Israel.

Despite the tremendous magnetic pull of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, it was not until the reign of King Josiah (638-609 B.C.E.), more than three centuries after it was built, that the last vestiges of local shrines and high places

The Bible Is for You

were finally eradicated. Josiah carried out radical reforms, purged the pagan-tainted regional altars and brought their priests to serve in the Jerusalem Temple. At last the nation had one central sanctuary, and its cultic practices were now under greater monotheistic control. In an ironical way, however, the centralizing of all sacrificial worship in the single, national sanctuary helped give rise to what one day—a day when the Temple would no longer stand—would become a new and unique religious institution, the synagogue.

It is quite likely that following Josiah's reforms, those who lived at some distance from Jerusalem, with difficult access to a sacrificial altar, sought to draw nearer to God in other ways. Their experiences in the hinterland outside Jerusalem must have aided their descendants some years later, when they were exiled to Babylonia after the First Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E. Since, now neither those who lived in Palestine nor those in Babylonia could sacrifice outside of Jerusalem—for neither altar nor priest was permitted to function beyond the central sanctuary—they sought to bind themselves together in religious devotions that would tie them to the Temple, its services and its ritual laws, without being present physically. We can picture them, for example, gathering in their homes on the sacred day of the week, the Sabbath, to read to one another from the scrolls of the Law and the writings of their prophets. After reading from these texts someone might lead in prayer, perhaps using those psalms which were part of the Temple service, and still others might interpret some portion of the sacred text, using the oral traditions which had been handed down traditionally from father to son.

Ezra's public reading of the Law (described in great detail in Nehemiah, Chapter 8) must have helped to set the future

pattern for the synagogue service. It is believed that from that time forward the reading of Scripture became a characteristic feature of Jewish public worship. While the Talmud fancifully suggests that Moses himself ordained that portions of Law should be read on Sabbaths, holy days, new moons and the intermediate days of the festivals, it does ascribe the synagogue custom of the reading of the Law on Monday and Thursday mornings (market days) and Sabbath afternoons to Ezra.¹ It is most likely that at the outset the readings from the Law on ordinary Sabbaths were freely selected by the reader himself. It was probably not before the third Christian century that the Pentateuch was finally divided into sections of definable length, which would enable the congregation to complete the whole cycle of its readings in a fixed time. In Palestine, the synagogues based their weekly Torah readings on a triennial cycle, finishing the whole of the Law once in three years, while in Babylonia it was customary to complete the readings during the course of a single year. In addition, it became customary to read a selection from the Prophets at the close of the lesson from the Pentateuch, and care was given to select a portion which was appropriate to the theme of the first reading. (It is instructive to note here that the Christian custom of including a first and a second lesson from Scripture at church services is based upon the two readings at the synagogue service—the first from the Torah, the second from the Prophets. In the Church, however, this procedure has been adapted to its own needs: the first reading is taken from its Old Testament; the second is a corresponding reading taken from the New Testament.)

Nor was the third section of the Hebrew Bible neglected

¹ *Jer. Megillah* 75a.

The Bible Is for You

at the synagogue service. On special occasions entire books from this division—the Hagiographa—came to be read after they had entered the canon in 90 C.E.; the Song of Songs, on Passover; Ruth, on Pentecost; Lamentations, on the Fast Day of Av; Ecclesiastes, on Tabernacles, Esther, on the Feast of Lots. In the course of time, too, a homily became an independent part of the service. It was by means of the homily that the congregation became acquainted with the other Biblical books which were not read as an integral part of the synagogue service. The preachers developed a style which leaned heavily upon quotation, and a good deal of their material was based upon an interpretation of the books of the Prophets, as well as the Hagiographa. As early as the first Christian century, Philo of Alexandria could explain the nature of the synagogue to his Greek-speaking neighbors in pedagogical terms only: "Schools of practical wisdom, self-control, manliness, uprightness and the other virtues are opened every seventh day in all cities. In these schools the people sit decorously, keeping silence and listening with the utmost attention out of a thirst for refreshing discourse, while one of the best qualified stands up and instructs them in what is best and most conducive to welfare, things by which their whole life may be made better."²

Whenever it happened that Scriptural teaching was integrated into worship, a translation of the original text became an urgent necessity. In the course of time Hebrew had become a sacred tongue, used principally by the learned. The rank and file of the people spoke a sister Semitic language—Aramaic. In the Talmud, the post-Biblical religious compila-

² See George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 1932), I, p. 306.

Translations and Commentaries

tions of the early rabbis, we find references to the procedure which was adopted for public instruction in the Bible. At his desk in the synagogue stood the reader, who intoned the traditional Hebrew chanting of the text, and near him the official translator (*targeman*.) A single verse was read—in the case of the Prophets, a section—and translated forthwith into Aramaic. The translation was given from memory, often in a free style, and not always without homiletical and sermonic interpretation. Apparently it was not easy to follow a middle-of-the-road course, whereby the translation was direct and true and yet made fresh and vigorous by an interpretive rendition. Thus, the rabbis had need to admonish the translator by laying down the dictum: "He who renders a verse as it reads, with strict literalness, lies, he that makes additions is a blasphemer."³ It is interesting and instructive to note that "strict literalness" in the interpretation of Scripture was frowned upon very early in the history of Israel.⁴ This was the spirit which prompted these religious teachers to expound the view that the "Torah speaks in the language of men"—thus indicating that it was intended to be communicated to all, in ways which would reach into their very hearts.⁵

It does not seem incorrect to suppose that it was just this desire for flexibility, a wish to retain an open and unfixed approach to interpretation, that prompted the rabbis to look

³ Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin*, 49a.

⁴ Indeed, one of the basic points of division over which the Pharisees and the Sadducees split was this very question of Biblical interpretation. The former, the lay teachers who became the rabbis and whose interpretation was to be regarded by later generations as normative, saw the Bible as moral teaching, open to broad interpretation, while the latter, the hereditary priests, were the archconservatives who defended a fundamentalist Biblical position.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot*, 31b.

The Bible Is for You

with disfavor upon the writing down of the Targum, as the combination translation-interpretation was called. Some of the translators apparently had difficulty memorizing their material and had committed it to writing. In the earlier days of the Rabbinic period these written translations were prohibited, but, as the mass of interpretive material increased, it became impossible to rely solely upon oral transmission. As a result, one Targum in particular became the accepted written translation. It was, of course, written in Aramaic, and, although it is generally ascribed to the proselyte Onkelos, it is more likely an earlier work written in Palestine, sometime around the second Christian century. This translation of the Pentateuch apparently followed most closely the attitude toward the text which was held by the rabbis of that period, and thus received their official consent. Other Targums, Aramaic translations of the whole of Hebrew Bible, were to follow.

But these translations were to be preserved and studied principally by Jews. It was only when the Bible was made available in a non-Semitic language, a language which traveled throughout the ancient civilized world, that its message was brought to those beyond the household of Israel. This was the result of the first Greek translation, which came to be known as the Septuagint.

The Septuagint (short form of the Latin *septuaginta*, meaning "seventy") made possible the transmission of Scripture from the hands of Egyptian Jews, who were responsible for the translation, to the Christian Church, whose converts were principally Greek-speaking pagans. It seems fairly certain that without this Greek version, and the later additions based upon it, the conversion of Europe to Christianity would

Translations and Commentaries

have been virtually impossible. This epoch-making translation, in itself, provides an interesting sidelight on history.

The *Letter or Epistle of Aristeas*, written in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247 B.C.E.) claims to be a reliable contemporary account of how the translation came to be made. According to this narrative, the king's librarian, Demetrius of Phalerum, suggests to the king that a copy of the Law of the Jews be placed in the royal library. To Jerusalem a mission is sent, headed by Aristeas, loaded down with many valuable gifts and a letter to the high priest Eleazar. The priest then forwards a copy of the Pentateuch to the Egyptian king, in the hands of seventy-two elders, six from each of the tribes of Israel, men who are able to translate the original into Greek. The seventy-two translators are sent off far from the capital city to a quiet island to undertake their work. Each day they translate—every man for himself—and then they meet together to compare results and to agree upon a common rendition. After seventy-two sessions of rigorous labor they finish the translation. It is given to Demetrius who has it read to the Jewish community; they delight in it and ask to receive a copy. The King hears the book read before him, expresses his favor, and directs that it be added to his library and carefully watched over.

While this delightful story must not be written off as complete fantasy, the initiative for the translation most likely came from the Jews of Alexandria rather than from the king, or his librarian. They were participating in the Greek life of the country and needed a text which most of them could understand, and which might also be read by Egyptians, whom the Jews were interested in influencing. In any event, an historical landmark had been erected with the arrival of the Penta-

The Bible Is for You

teuch in Egypt in a form which could enter into the mainstream of Hellenistic life. In due course, the translation of the Pentateuch prodded the translation of the Prophets and the Writings, and, by the middle of the second pre-Christian century, the process of translating the entire Bible into Greek had been completed.

For almost two centuries, the Christian Church had no sacred books other than the Hebrew Scripture—taken from the Jews. It was only toward the close of the second century that what is now called the New Testament was joined to the Hebrew Bible, and both together formed the Scripture of the Christian Church. It was about this time, too, that the Christians set about arranging for their own translation of the Hebrew Bible—one that might suit their own religious purpose. Two such versions were made—one in Latin, the other in Syriac.⁶ The Syriac translation, known as the Peshitta (which means “the Simple”), was based in part upon the then-current Hebrew text, and embodied a number of the traditional Jewish interpretive meanings. There are, however, some intermixtures of style, which seem to point to the fact that the Septuagint—which was the Bible version used by the Church—was also used as the basis for the translation.

The first official Latin version goes back to this second century, too, although it was based upon a number of obscure and earlier translations from the Greek. But, at the request of the Roman Bishop Damasus, a better translation was now

⁶ Syriac is a sister language of Aramaic, and was spoken in northern Syria at this time. It survives in a few isolated parts of the world, as, for example, in certain localities in India, where the Roman Catholic Church still conducts its Mass in this ancient language.

Translations and Commentaries

called for. This undertaking was assumed by Jerome who set out for Palestine toward the end of the fourth century in order to acquire a thorough knowledge of Hebrew at the hands of Jewish teachers. With their assistance he completed a new translation, which attempted to use the Latin then common to the speech of the people—and thus this version received the name “The Vulgate” (from *vulgata*, meaning “common”). This work was not altogether acceptable to the Church in Jerome’s own day, but, with the passage of time, it became more and more the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Finally, in 1546, at the Council of Trent, it was named the only authentic Latin translation to be used in the educational and religious work of the Church.

For a long time, it was the Greek Bible—the Septuagint or later revisions—and the Latin—the older versions—and then, the Vulgate, which dominated Church circles. Since the average person could no longer read or write these two classical languages, the Bible text itself was closed to him; he could only hear about it from the priests of the Church. But in the sixteenth century, a strong desire “to get to the Bible” began to make itself felt—the spirit of the Reformation was beginning to overtake Europe. The direct answers to this new upsurge of interest were to be given in the form of two significant translations—the one by Martin Luther, in German; the other, the so-called Authorized Version of 1611, the King James, in English. The effect of both was to open up the pages of the Bible to the masses of people, and to make Biblical religion more accessible to the layman. The new piety of the century was linked to the new sense of national aspiration. As the modern period opened, the feeling that each country had the *national* right to establish its own form of Christianity

The Bible Is for You

—*cuius regio eius religio*—became the dominating principle. The colloquial Bible translations were no mere symbol of this new religious-national orientation; they were, in fact, at the very core of the issue. If they were not the principal cause for this radical departure, they surely were high up on the list of causes.

Luther's knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic was, to say the least, neither vast nor masterful. He nevertheless worked painstakingly to arrive at a translation which could serve the needs of the layman. It was Luther's hope that, by providing the average Christian with a Bible he could read and understand on his own, the authority of the Roman Church tradition and its priestly hierarchy would be lessened. He worked with the original, but was aided by competent authorities and relied heavily on a number of commentaries to elucidate difficult passages. One of these in particular, as we shall have occasion to note, was a chief source of help—that of Nicholas de Lyra. The first edition of the completed work was finally made available in 1534, and became so popular and beloved a translation that as many as ten editions were issued during his lifetime. Students of the language often point to this work as one of the principal molders of modern German, exerting an impact upon the development of the language that is reminiscent of the influence of the King James version in the shaping of English language and literature.

When King James I of England, in 1604, himself selected the men who were to be commissioned as translators of a new rendition, he was embarking upon an epoch-making event. This version, finally produced in 1611 was, of course, not the first attempt at rendering the Bible into English. The translations of John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, Miles Cover-

Translations and Commentaries

dale, the Geneva Bible and the Bishops Bible were among its significant predecessors. What distinguishes the Authorized Version of 1611 from all those which had come before—and perhaps, even from those which have followed—is its matchless cadences and rhythms, its faultless literary taste and its heightened poetic prose.

Since 1611, there have been many attempts at presenting newer translations of the Bible in all of the known languages of the world. In recent years in America, all three religious groups—Catholics, Protestants and Jews—have been hard at work revising the older versions, attempting to make the Bible speak even more sharply the tongue and the mind of moderns. The Catholics are revising their authorized English translation—the Douai Bible, which first saw the light in 1609. The Protestants have already published the “RSV”—the revised standard version of the Bible, which tries to take advantage of the latest and the best scholarly material. The Jews, too, have commissioned a committee of translators to rework their Jewish Publication Society version of 1917. Nevertheless the power and sublimity of the King James translation still abides as a classical model. While scholars are in agreement that it needs vast improvement on the side of interpretation—and none can gainsay the seriousness of this charge—most readers will tend to accept the penetrating judgment of one important student: “When modern revisers have changed its matchless diction where no difference of meaning was involved, they have erred in their zeal. Practical as the object of all Bible translations must be, the King James version, in which so many earlier efforts have deposited their happiest and best, has pointed the way how with accuracy of rendition there must go elegance of style, and how a transla-

The Bible Is for You

tion of the Scriptures must aim at rivalling the stately diction of the original.”⁷

Commentaries

Two characteristics among many stand out, when one pays close attention to the literary qualities of the Biblical text. Examined separately, they appear to be contradictory; joined together in context, they are related as “bone of bone and flesh of flesh.”

On the one hand, virtually all Hebrew words can be traced back to roots which originally denoted something that can be grasped by the senses. The language, thus, is principally one of the sense and the emotions, necessarily concrete, vivid and direct; in a word, realistic! It does not—indeed, cannot—deal in abstractions or in philosophical speculation. While we to-day read *into* Genesis our own meanings and refer to the “*spirit* of God” which “hovered over the face of the waters,” the ancient Hebrews understood the phrase to mean something very concrete—the “wind” of God, or the “breath” of God. To them, the deity was not an abstract spirit, but a real and a living being.⁸ And when they described God as patient or merciful they called Him “long of breath”; when wroth, in impatience, they pictured Him as “short of breath.”

⁷ Max L. Margolis, *The Story of Bible Translations* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917), p. 7.

⁸ For a fuller, if not always satisfactory, discussion of the Biblical concept of the “spirit of God” see: Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1944), pp. 143–58, also, a definitive discussion of the Hebrew language in crisp and succinct form may be found in G. R. Driver’s monograph “The Modern Study of the Hebrew Language,” in A. S. Peake, ed., *The People and the Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 73–120.

Translations and Commentaries

Similarly, when they describe the activities of men, the Biblical storytellers are earthly and fleshly. Man emerges realistically as a flesh-and-blood being, fully capable of passion and sinfulness—indeed, he sometimes appears all too human! There is no attempt to touch up the human picture, to censor the “unspiritual”—no man in the Bible, not even Moses, escapes this objective and realistic reflection of his human condition.

Yet, on the other hand, unlike the Greek storytellers Bible narrators do not attempt to fill in every detail of their tales. They leave much to our imagination and consciously, it would seem, invite the reader to bridge their voids with meanings of their own. The Hebrew narrator, it has been said, “deals in empty spaces.”

How does one square what seems like two opposing tendencies—the unrepressed attention to the concrete, the vivid and the real, and the premeditated restraint, even caution, in not telling the “whole story?”

The answer to this question may be found by examining the methods of the rabbi-teachers, whose interpretations of Scripture during the first five centuries of the Christian era laid the foundations for the later commentaries. They produced a Midrash on Scripture, or a “searching” of its implicit as well as its explicit ethical and spiritual meanings, which brought the Book closer to the people and helped to infuse the lives of even the common folk with a deeper religious feeling.

When Mohammed labeled the people of Israel the “people of the Book” he was clearly emphasizing their most important contribution to the history of mankind. For not by embracing an abstract belief in monotheism did the Jewish people add to the treasury of the spirit. More significantly, it was the

The Bible Is for You

Bible which they preserved—and the way in which they preserved it—that at once accounts for their own survival and for the amazing preservation of the record of man's encounter with the divine, in the form of living memory. While the destruction of their temple atop Mount Zion has been viewed as a national calamity, in a profounder religious and historical sense that event dramatically paved the way for the crucial and epochal spiritual development: the Book replaced the sanctuary, the moral teacher (rabbi) overtook the priest, and, in place of the mysteries of cult and sacrifice (known only to the sacerdotal community), the will of God as revealed in His Torah became the inheritance of the whole group.

What Christianity in the west failed to experience until after the time of Martin Luther had been continuously vital to Jewish religious life for more than a millenium and a half. The study of Scripture by the laymen—*by adults as well as children*—had been made into the most serious of all religious obligations by Pharisee-teachers who replaced the Sadducee-priests after the Temple's fall in the year 70. They suggested that if all of the divine commandments were placed in one scale of the balance, and the imperative "to study Torah" placed in the other, the requirement "to study Torah" would outweigh them all.⁹ The mysteries of religion as occult knowledge properly belonging to a professional or hereditary class of religionists were thus cut down and dissolved in one fell swoop. Pursuit of "knowledge of the Lord" now became the proper concern of the entire people. And that knowledge, it was taught, was to be found in the Bible.

But this Bible, it soon became clear, also possessed its own

⁹ *Mishnah Peah*, Chapter I.

Translations and Commentaries

mysteries. It could not be read, let alone understood, without learning how to use special keys which would unlock its doors. These keys, however, were made available to all who would submit to the discipline of study—not, however, as an academic exercise in textual mastery, but as a creative, religious experience. And the manner in which the Bible was studied religiously—the Midrash method—sheds clear illumination on the problem we have posed. It answers the question: How is the detailed vividness of the Bible reconciled with its amazing silence at key moments in its narratives?

The basic philosophy of this method is summed up in the rabbinic dictum already quoted in another connection: "He who renders a verse as it reads, with strict literalness, lies; he that makes additions is a blasphemer." The paradoxical logic of this rule becomes clear when we apply it to the problem at hand: The Bible's details must be scrutinized with the greatest of care, for not one of its words is superfluous. Where the text appears to be redundant, one must search for a suggested meaning; where it appears to be overly specific or where silence evokes no spiritual response, one must seek beyond the letter to discover its spirit. Strict literalness sees nothing but the letter, whilst inattention to the letter—no matter how seemingly repetitive—unwittingly leads us away from its spirit.

A single, yet revealing, example of the midrashic method will suffice to illustrate: In Hebrew, the third verse in Genesis II presents a grammatical, as well as a philosophical, enigma. Literally, it was translated: "And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it; because that in it He rested from all His work which God had created *to do*." The rabbi-teachers were puzzled by the strange conclusion of the verse. "To do"

The Bible Is for You

seemed to them a superfluous phrase; on the face of it, the verse would make better sense without it! Moreover, *who* was "to do" *anything*, now that creation was completed? But they could not agree that the phrase "to do" was unnecessary—apparently, they taught, it must have a significant, implicit religious meaning. And so they set about searching for possible religious intentions. Finally, they concluded that this phrase was really intended to teach the ethical-theological idea that man was, in effect, God's coworker in the world which He had created. *To do*—this was a directive *to man*; man, as God's partner, was commanded to help *complete* God's creation, *to do* God's work on earth!

This midrashic teaching of the rabbis is not only an example of the bold manner in which they sought to discover an ethical lesson which they saw latent in this particular text, but, in a way, serves to elucidate their general approach to the whole of the Text. Man's religious task, as they saw it, was to hearken to God's word as recorded in Scripture—but God's word was ever new, since even creation was incomplete. As God relies upon man to fulfill and to continue the work of creation, so His work must continue to be sought even "between the lines" of Scripture.

The midrashic method, it should be noted, is not the method of allegory. It is the philosopher, not the religious teacher, who approaches the stories of the past as a strict rationalist. He reads as if they were intended merely as primitive pedagogical devices or as narrative parables which carry only allegorical lessons. After philosophy arose in Greece, following the Age of Fable, the tendency developed to read the older poetry of Homer as a series of allegorical tales told in story form, only for the sake of transmitting some glimpses

Translations and Commentaries

of truth or some ethical teaching. The method of allegory is undertaken when a generation is unwilling to accept the teachings of the past, and is yet incapable of discarding them, altogether. As a result, the older form is kept, while altogether new meanings are elicited from it.

Some of the ancient rabbis—and even medieval ones, like Maimonides—did allegorize some of the stories of Scripture. But, in the main, they restricted this method to those portions of the Bible which were anthropomorphic—where God is represented as having human form. This peculiarly Jewish dread prodded these interpreters of the Bible to fall back on the allegorical method, as a means of spiritualizing what might have appeared to be too material a conception of God—in the eyes of the unschooled. Ironically, the concreteness of the original narrators, who could only describe God in terms of human nearness for whom the “spirit” of God was the “breath” of God, was abstracted by their later commentators, who lived in a more sophisticated age. Yet, as regards their general approach to the “truth” of Scripture, these interpreters were not seeking to harmonize the Bible with the regnant philosophy of their day. Their chief purpose in seeking and in studying was not to discover what *men could believe about the Bible*. Rather, as religious teachers, they were inquiring after hidden, or partially disclosed, meanings, in order to discover what it was that *God was saying to man*. We shall yet have occasion to observe how modern students of the Bible find themselves dealing with similar problems—*plus ça change plus c’est la même chose!*¹⁰

There is still another significant, yet often overlooked, value in these earlier rabbinic commentaries on the Bible. It

¹⁰ See Chapter 5.

The Bible Is for You

lies in the historical fact that the method of Midrash had already been developed before the canon of the Bible was closed—between the age of the Maccabees and the beginning of the Christian era. Thus, many of the religious teachings which these earlier commentators elicited from the Text were not the later afterthoughts of sophisticated generations reading their own meanings into the Bible. Actually they were almost contemporary with the later Biblical age and mentality. When we study Midrash, then, we actually come as close as we can to the mood of the Biblical writers and redactors themselves; we are thus saved from the tempting folly of completely overlooking the meanings which the ancients themselves understood, in our vain attempts to read our own ideas into Scripture. (Even the devil, it has been said, is quite capable of quoting Scripture *his way*!)

It is true, of course, that some of these commentators did engage in fanciful interpretations—sometimes even in what appear to be farfetched flights of the imagination. In addition to a straight literal approach which sought to explain the evident meanings of Scripture, they also employed allegorical, moral or mystical methods of interpretation. This usage, however, never overrode their basic principle that “no Bible verse can ever lose its evident and literal meaning.”¹¹

Why, then, did they sometimes go beyond the evident to seek out the “hidden” meanings? To justify their own personal beliefs? To exploit the text as a pretext for their own private opinions? Not at all.

The best way to explain their purpose is to draw an analogy from the world of art. If art is to be more than a fleeting effort, if it is to retain strength and power beyond its own

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Sabbath* 63a.

time, it must be capable of transcending itself. One can never be satisfied with the reply when he asks the foolish question: What did the artist mean? The answer to this query cannot fully explain the work of art for *the artist meant more than he himself knew!* This is why we can go back to great paintings or listen again to classical symphonies and still find them fresh and full of newly discovered meanings. Similarly, while these commentators were obviously concerned with literal meanings, they were also interested in discovering the sub-surface nuances, the inherent possibilities of meaning which went beyond the strict literalness of the words alone. It is in the nature of classical art to speak to us anew all the time. These commentators sought the glow, not only the fire, the echo, not merely the sound—because for them the Bible was the most consummate of all works of art.

Which explains why generation after generation of Jewish students of the Bible—until recently, this virtually meant the whole people—was never satisfied with the bald text of the Bible alone. Always, they read the text in the light of and with the aid of a traditional commentary. Among Arabic-speaking Jews, the work of Saadia Gaon, completed in the early part of the ninth century, became one of their standard commentaries, and accompanied their studies of Scripture. In European communities, it was Rashi, the eleventh-century French vintner-turned-scholar, whose simple but penetrating interpretations were studied by young and old. Indeed, Rashi's commentary was carefully studied and closely followed by Nicholas de Lyra, whose Biblical work shows a marked influence on the translation of Martin Luther.

We may disagree with some of the renditions of these commentaries, but to make the Bible come alive as a book for

The Bible Is for You

adults we must learn how to adapt their method. We, too, need a Midrash—the older one, but also a newer one. We need to begin with the literal meanings. But if the Book is to have religious significance for us, we must learn how to go beyond the text, to read between its lines.

The Bible's Influence

IT HAS been well said that no education without a knowledge of the Bible may be said to be truly liberal. The best in English literature, not to speak of the great writings of the world, is hardly comprehensible without an understanding of the Biblical background of so many of its allusions and depictions. And it is clear why this should be so. Until the beginning of modern times and the growth of humanistic, secular culture, the peoples of the world knew no real history save that recorded in Scripture. Since the religious authorities were responsible for what educational activities were afforded their people, it was the Biblical story of man in the world to which they pointed, and which they used as the basis for knowledge of man and society.

But the beginning of modern times was also the beginning of the national awakening; nationalism as an instrument of group policy was virtually unknown before the advent of the American and French revolutions. When the nation-state

The Bible Is for You

came into being, so did a consciousness of its purpose come to the foreground, and schools, organized by governments rather than by religious groups, began to teach national as well as spiritual ideals. To inculcate these views, it became necessary, for the first time in the west, to see history as a reflection of national character, and not merely as the story of the divine in human affairs. Ever since, with increasing tension, conflicts between the secular purposes of the nation and the religious desires of the churches have arisen in the broad arena of education.

It is not our purpose here to enter into the great church-state debate in the matters of education. What is important to note, however, is the inescapable fact that western culture, until recent times, was thoroughly immersed in the religious teachings of the major faith groups, and in that situation the Bible served as the core of the educational curriculum. History was encompassed in the adventures of ancient Israel, and the purpose of history discovered by studying the unfolding of divine intervention in the drama of that people's survival. Moral philosophy was taught as it emerged from the pages of the Law and the Prophets. The geography of the Holy Land, the place names of Biblical sites and references to the cities and lands which found their way into Scripture were carefully studied and eagerly digested. In short, for long centuries the Hebrew Bible supplied western culture with its principal textbook for the knowledge of worldly as well as religious ideas.

That such an intimate connection between the Bible and western culture could not have been severed even after the rise of modern secularism is clearly obvious. For the very fabric of our society—the literary, social, even the political

The Bible's Influence

strands—had been interwoven with the thread of Biblical values.

To the English-speaking peoples in particular, the Bible had become virtually a national monument, for much of their own cultural history is rooted in it. Biblical eloquence has deeply penetrated English literature: Caedmon, the progenitor of English poetry, won distinction and popularity for his paraphrases of Bible stories, the *Chronicle* of King Alfred the Great was based upon the Hebrew Book of Chronicles; Shakespeare, dean of English writers, made abundant and fruitful use of Biblical characters and quotations, John Milton, student of Hebrew, made the Bible the essential source of most of his great works; Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Browning, not to mention scores of other lesser-known poets, were directly and fundamentally influenced by the cadences and the grandiloquence of Biblical rhythms.

It was, of course, the grandeur and the sweep of the King James translation which aided and abetted the growing link between Hebraism and Anglo-Saxon thought and culture. Symptomatic of this is the scarcely remembered yet highly significant fact that the English language before 1611 was still in a highly fluid and unfinished state. The King James version, which itself was to attain the status of virtual inspiration, and which was often the only book possessed by an English-speaking household, helped to shape the language, to standardize it and to fill it with a rich addition of idiomatic flavors. Through it filtered the mighty waters of Biblical imagery and linguistic suggestion. Anyone who has ever made a study of language knows that it is infinitely more than a means of communication, it is a key to the thought process and mentality of a people. Wittingly or otherwise, as the

The Bible Is for You

King James translation became the principal literary standard by which the English language was measured, family after family came to think in Hebraic terms and to evaluate life in relation to the Biblical frame of reference.

Because they lacked either the words themselves or the conceptions conveyed by the words, many western tongues have had to borrow from the Hebrew vocabulary of the Bible. Not only has the English language been enriched by loan words from the Hebrew—words like *amen*, *Armageddon*, *cherub*, *hallelujah*, *jeremiad*, *jubilee*, *Paradise*, *Sabbath*, *Satan*, *shibboleth*, *shekel*, and numerous others—but so have many other European languages. And there are a host of religious terms which may be derived from Latin or Greek, but whose semantic significance is essentially Hebraic. Words like *Lord*, *prophet*, *benediction*, *angel*, and *adoration* are but a few examples of the many Hebrew ideas and expressions which have traveled from their native habitat to our own via the circuitous route of Athens and Rome.

Mary Ellen Chase reminds us how much of the Hebrew Bible has actually entered into our daily living in word, phrase, image, and simile: "Think for a moment how in the course of a single day spent in the homely, necessary details of living we clarify and illuminate our talk with one another by the often unconscious use of its language. An unwelcome neighbour becomes 'gall and wormwood' or 'a thorn in the flesh'; 'a hated task' 'a millstone about our neck'; we escape from one thing or another 'by the skin of our teeth'; we earn our bread 'by the sweat of our faces'; . . . in moments of anger we remember that 'a soft answer turneth away wrath'; intrusions upon our sleep are 'the pestilence that walketh in darkness'; we warn our children to be 'diligent in business'

The Bible's Influence

so that they may not 'stand before mean men', or prophesy that if 'they sow the wind they shall reap the whirlwind' . . . we heap 'coals of fire' on the heads of recalcitrant children or of harassed wives or husbands; having no servants we are ourselves 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'; we long for a time when men 'shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks'; and after an irritating session with ration books, we are forced to remember that 'better a dinner of herbs where love is than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.' "

This is but a minor sampling of the way in which the Hebrew language—its vivid and unique expression—and the moral overtones of Biblical insight have become integral to the culture of English-speaking peoples. We may "speak English," but, to a large extent, fed by Biblical food for thought, we "think in Hebrew." And how the Hebrew thinks, the structure of his style and the psychology of his language—which we have, to some extent, borrowed—we shall have occasion to examine.

The great historian, W. E. H. Lecky, summarized in a single sentence the basic connection between early American political philosophy and the Hebrew Bible. Said he: ". . . in the great majority of instances the early Protestant defenders of civil liberty derived their political principles chiefly from the Old Testament."¹ With strong support from the New England pulpits, the common man in Yankee towns consistently opposed absolute monarchy, quoting the admonitions of Moses and of Samuel against the corrupting powers of kings. The spirit of the Mayflower Compact, and such fundamental

¹ W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (London: Longmans, Green, 1913), II, 172.

The Bible Is for You

American documents as the Salem pact and the Connecticut Code of 1655, breathe the language and the feeling of the Bible.

This political influence which helped to shape early America stems primarily from an overlooked theological connection between Puritan beliefs and the religion of the Hebrew Bible. That the Pilgrim Fathers labeled many of their political and social documents "pacts" or "compacts" is no accident. They did this because they were deeply and fundamentally committed to the Biblical concept of the covenanted community. New England was to be a New Israel because, in the view of the first settlers, the New World was also to be offered a divine covenant, such as had been given to the seed of Abraham. They felt called upon to establish no ordinary society, for they believed that they were elected to form themselves into a sacred community "for the enjoyment of God's ordinances and the elevation of their colony into the status of a chosen people."²

This profound commitment to the making of a society in which the laws of God would be kept, and for which in return His special blessings would be conferred, is Biblical to the core. The language of Governor Winthrop's sermon, preached aboard the ship *Arabella* while still in midocean en route to the New World, can easily be mistaken as a paraphrase of Abraham, Jacob, Moses or Ezra:

Thus stands the cause between God and us, we are entered into Covenant with him for this work; we have taken out a Commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own

² Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 23. Copyright © 1955 by the University of Chicago.

The Bible's Influence

Articles, we have professed to enterprise these actions upon these and these ends; we have hereupon besought him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire then hath he ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission, and will expect a strict performance of the Articles contained in it, but if we shall neglect the observation of these Articles which are the ends we have propounded, and dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord shall surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged of such a perjured people, and make us to know the price of the breach of such a Covenant.³

So it was that, when they came to establish their first legal and political systems, the administration of justice, the manner in which magistrates were chosen, and the basic principles of their juridical procedures, they leaned heavily upon the Mosaic Law. An entire literature exists which demonstrates how early American political life depended upon Biblical legislation for both the spirit and letter of its own enactments. If, as has been incisively suggested, "Puritanism was, in essence, the rebirth of the Hebrew spirit in the Christian conscience,"⁴ then the generating force for the rebirth was first and foremost the Israel-like Puritan commitment to the idea of "the covenanted community."

This Christian conscience in early America found its way into the very mores of the community, so that the Bible and its *Anschauung* were consciously lived in the New Canaan as they were assumed to have been lived in the older Canaan

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Abraham A. Neuman, *Relation of Hebrew Scriptures to American Institutions* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1943), p. 6.

The Bible Is for You

of Hebrew times. Village, town and city were given Hebrew names to reflect this intimate feeling of interrelatedness: Bethlehem, Canaan, Dothan, Eden, Goshen, Hebron, Jordan, Jericho, Mount Carmel, Nimrod, Pisgah, Rehoboth, Salem and Zion are but a few examples of hundreds more.⁵ Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ezekiel, Amos, Isaiah, Israel, Moses, David, Ezra and other Biblical heroes were also the proud names of thousands upon thousands of children born to Christian parents in America.

These pilgrim Abrahams, Isaacs and Jacobs, like the Israelites they consciously emulated, celebrated their Sunday in Hebrew fashion. Their Sabbath, too, began at sundown of the previous day, and from sunset Saturday until Sunday night they did not shave, sweep their rooms, make their beds, prepare their food, nor wash their cooking and table utensils.⁶ And in their churches, following early Hebrew custom, they segregated men and women during worship.

Many cultural and ideological streams have gone into the making of the Anglo-Saxon mind and mood. It would obviously be fatuous to claim primacy for one source over another. Greece and Rome have made mighty contributions, and the legacies of both are clearly engraved upon the tablets of historical memory. Jurisprudence, philosophy, architecture and language are but a few of the significant areas which still bear their classical imprint. In the making of America, too, overlaid upon these classical legacies, are two prominent geocultural factors; the expanding western frontier and the mass waves of immigration from the Old World. The frontier, as

⁵ See Moshe and Lottie Davis, *Map of Biblical Names in America* (New York: Associated American Artists, Inc., Undated).

⁶ J. Gregory, *Puritanism in the Old World and the New* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1895), p. 318

The Bible's Influence

Turner taught, was surely one of the fathers of the American variation on the old democratic theme; and the "uprooted" immigrant, as Handlin suggests, coming to these shores from a wide variety of cultures, helped to liquefy any possible movement toward authoritarianism, and kept America free for pluralism in cultural as well as in religious activity.

Yet, for all that, the Hebrew Bible had for so long a time, and in so crucial a period of American history, been the seed-bed of our ultimate social and political personality, its teachings so imbedded in the heritage aborning, that to ignore its fundamental place in the shaping of its ideals, is, in the words of one objective student, a kind of "national apostasy." When Franklin and Jefferson drafted a seal for the new United States it pictured Pharaoh seated in an open chariot, passing through the divided waters of the Red Sea in hot pursuit of the Israelites. Moses stands at the other shore and causes the sea to inundate Pharaoh and his charioteers. Beneath the seal was the motto: "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God."⁷ Clearly, then, the founding fathers, men of Christian conviction, understood the Hebrew Bible as having special, personal and national relevance to their bold experiment in government and nation-building. They did not see it as some remote fossilized document which depicted the culture of an ancient people, long forgotten. For them, it had the power of immediacy and of directness. It was *their* Bible, not merely a collection of curious Hebrew documents. Pharaoh was *their* arch oppressor, King James I, the Red Sea was *their* Atlantic Ocean, and Moses, *their* George Washington.

⁷ Quoted in Oscar Straus, *The Origin of the Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1885), pp. 119-20.

The Bible Is for You

Their strong abhorrence of the very institution of the monarchy cannot be fully explained or understood unless we recognize how deeply they identified their political, and not only their religious destiny, with ancient Israel. They knew that in the history of Israel the institution of a human king was established only as a concession to the weakness of the people. Far from possessing divine rights, in the Biblical view the human king was subject to all of the ills of flesh, and was the object of repeated moral admonishment at the hands of prophet after prophet. Indifference to human misery, callousness of spirit, oppression of the weak and the poor—these, and other royal failures, are mercilessly depicted in the Scriptural stories. The prophets never fail to reprove, criticize and point their fingers at the king who lifts his heart *above his brethren*.

In an age when the pulpit was a significant mold of political opinions, and in a society where the Bible was the principal source of knowledge and inspiration, it was no accident that colonial America did not aspire to crown George Washington king of the United States, but rather voted to elect him president of their republic. Their distrust of monarchy stemmed not so much from a sophisticated political philosophy as it did from their Bible lessons. Pulpit after pulpit hammered away at this theme, and perhaps no other text in colonial America was more widely quoted than this plainly outspoken declaration of Samuel:

And Samuel told all the words of the Lord unto the people that asked of him a king: And he said "This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: he will take your sons, and appoint them unto him, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and they shall run before his chariots. And he will appoint them

The Bible's Influence

unto him for captains of thousands, and captains of fifties; and to plow his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and the instruments of his chariots. And he will take your daughters to be perfumers, and to be cooks, and to be bakers And he will take your fields, and your vineyard, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. . . . And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king whom ye shall have chosen you, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.”⁸

What made the Bible an adult book for early America, and what makes it so for other times or places? Two factors must be at work: we must *universalize* it as we *personalize* it, and not one of these activities alone will do—only both together. When we regard Scripture merely as history, we read it as history and it remains dry as dust. When we consider Scripture as being only the specific story of a single people—something Puritans obviously did not do—we can view it only from a distance, dimly and darkly; it has nothing to say to those beyond the inner circle. The special role which the Bible plays in the life of America, in contrast to the role of Greece, Rome and the other vital forces in its history, is due to its living, ongoing influence. While they borrowed Hebraic ideas from Scripture, the early Americans did not see themselves as latter-day borrowers, but rather as the modern Israel, standing in Israel's place, hearkening to Israel's God. They did not appropriate the ideas of the Bible, as they did those of Greece and Rome; they were confronted by them in vital, direct, and, what was for them, real ways.

Here, then, is a significant clue for all who would seek to understand the ongoing relevance and influence of the Bible.

⁸ I Samuel 8:10-18.

The Bible Is for You

For it to live *in* us, we have to live *in* it, which is of course, no childish or puerile enterprise. For only when one confronts the Bible with the totality and fullness of one's own being can it speak to one in the full, the universal and the personal way in which it alone can be heard.

There are, of course, other ways in which the Bible can be met. Many of them are useful and beneficial, interesting and enlightening. But, for the most part, these are the special interests of the experts—and should be recognized for what they are: partial, fragmentized, impersonal, academic illuminations of an ancient classic. We cannot do with this alone for we get lost in a technical world intended primarily for intellectual tinkers. An exciting enterprise, no doubt, but often removed from the life-giving quality of the subject at hand.

But neither can we do without these specialists, for they do help to throw light upon the whole, and they do add depth and height to our perspectives. We are not merely thinking, but also feeling people. But we *do* think—and as adults we owe it to ourselves to meet the Bible at its best, to see it bathed in the new light which many serious students have helped cast upon it.

Modern Aids to Bible Study

GETTING to the moon and exploring space may be the dream of most people. In the land of the Bible, however, the archaeologist, not the space expert, is the national hero.

The popular imagination has been kindled by the possibility of unearthing—virtually in one's backyard—relics which date back to the Biblical past. There is, of course, good reason for this urgent preoccupation with the ancient past: it has proved to be highly practical to look to the earth to reveal its significant, if hidden, secrets. For the Israelis have already uncovered in the dust of the ages many forgotten military, economic and human achievements.

But above all else, archaeological discoveries have caused a new light to shine upon the Bible text and the background of its times. Until the eighteenth century, the Bible was almost universally accepted as the single most trustworthy textbook of life and history. But, as the Age of Reason dawned, its historicity and reliability as a source of truth came under

The Bible Is for You

widespread attack. The pendulum had swung from one extreme to the other.

Biblical data were now suspect, and no prominent, objective scholar could be expected to accept the traditional accounts as valid. "Myth" became the epithet of derision most widely used to describe the age of the patriarchs, the biography of Moses, the heroics of Joshua and most of the other Bible "tales." The deluge, the ark of Noah, the exodus from Egypt, the walls tumbling at Jericho and other typical moments which the Bible artfully describes were now regarded as fictitious, embellished and therefore worthless accounts of the past.

Scholars often complain that the masses are addicted to the ephemeral and fleeting in their intellectual fashions. On scrutiny, however, it turns out, that none are more fickle, more prone to passing fads, than the scholars themselves. Somehow it would have been considered too plebeian and benighted an attitude, when the dawn of Enlightenment came upon western Europe, for scholars to defend the veracity of the Biblical tradition. To do so would have labeled them unscholarly in a world which was making a rapid change-over from religious authority to scientific supremacy. Bibliolatry gave way to Biblioclasm—once everything in the Bible was sacred; now nothing was!

It is a typical modern phenomenon that "scientific" truths get changed every ten years or so. And, because education has been popularized and spread so thin over wide areas, the general public catches up with the old truths about the same time that the scholars begin to announce the new ones. The result, of course, is that the "latest" ideas of the average person have already been discarded as outmoded by those whose

Modern Aids to Bible Study

business it is to discover them—the scholar and the scientist.

All of this is extremely pertinent to our special case in point, the modern study of the Bible. For in the past three decades, as a result of the tremendous number of excavations which have been undertaken, archaeological discoveries have caused modern scholars to revise completely the theories of the nineteenth century, and to look with greater respect upon the Biblical record. Today, in the light of so many finds that help to document and support the text, scholars are swinging back toward the earlier view; again, most believe that, by and large, the Biblical report is more likely to be true than spurious, unless there is overwhelming evidence from other sources to prove the contrary.

But, true to form, the “educated general public” are still a generation behind. They still cling to the nineteenth-century theories which were taught as the gospel truth when they went to college. For most of these, science consists of what their teachers called scientific fact, at the time they went to school or college. Clearly, however, a more sophisticated discernment is required regarding all branches of knowledge than to accept last year’s discovery as this year’s truth. Not for naught has education been said to be deficient, unless it is part of a constant scheme of re-education.

While it surely is neither the last nor the only word on the Bible, no serious study of Scripture can avoid the new revelations of one of the brightest and most exciting aids to its understanding—archaeological science. So much new material has come to light so fast, however, that much of it has not yet been fully studied and digested. Good examples of such an embarrassment of riches are the Dead Sea Scrolls. Anybody who can read a daily newspaper has heard a great deal

The Bible Is for You

about them, but many extravagant claims are often made because not enough time has been taken to sift and to evaluate all of the evidence.

What helps to make Biblical archaeology a science is the fact that those who engage in it do not consciously set out to confirm as true—or false—the historical statements of the Bible. Yet in the process, long-forgotten words in the text have taken on new meaning, mistranslations have been corrected and a clearer and better reading of the Bible has been made possible. These discoveries, also, help to provide a good deal of the sidelight that has been dimmed by the centuries, to help to reconstruct a sharper picture of the historical, religious and cultural background of the Biblical books and the times which gave them birth.

A few pithy examples will help to dramatize the usefulness of this new tool.

Legends Are Based upon Real Experience

For a long time, skeptical readers of Scripture have suggested that its reports of natural or historical events must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. These are only legendary accounts, they claimed—by which they meant to suggest that these tales were not merely exaggerated or embellished stories of actual experiences, but spun out of whole cloth.

Archaeology, however, has done much to help us understand the way in which we must approach even what we may consider to be legendary accounts of the past. With its aid, we are coming to realize that legends are often more factual than fictitious, and that they grow out of the soil of real experience.

Modern Aids to Bible Study

What makes one description of an earlier event legendary and another historical is not that the former is imaginary and false, while the latter is actual and true. Indeed, both may be true, but for different reasons. Legends are rooted in historical or natural experiences; they are legendary rather than historical descriptions when the events they portray are told in a way which helps to fortify or to justify a particular belief or ideology. A depiction of events may be deemed to be a legend when the moral of its story is understood to be the cause rather than the effect, the motivation for, rather than the result of, the events themselves. The historian, on the other hand, is interested in the known effect, not in the hidden or unknown cause, and he reconstructs the facts without recourse to ulterior moral motive or to editorial judgment.

Yet, both approaches to the past—the legendary and the historical—begin from the same starting point and utilize the same facts. They lead to different, but not necessarily opposing, conclusions: the legend, to moral interpretation of the unknown cause, history, to a reconstruction of the event, in the light of visible effects.

There are many stories in the Bible which partake of the character of legend, and therefore no attempt at "proving" their historical accuracy should be made—you cannot put moral judgment to a scientific test. Yet, while archaeology cannot establish the historical credibility of these past events, it does shed remarkable light on their factual background. One of the most dramatic examples of its significant contribution in this area can be found in the fascinating results of a series of excavations at Ur of the Chaldees.

In the annals of the reign of kings in ancient Babylonia, in the time of the Sumerians, there are references to a great

The Bible Is for You

deluge which apparently interrupted the course of history: "then came the Flood, after the Flood kingship again descended from heaven." But were we to rely upon these references alone, we would most probably have had little historical remembrance of the event. It is principally from the pages of the Bible, in the story of Noah and the Ark, that we know about the ancient deluge whose "waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth," so that "all the high mountains that were under the whole heaven were covered."¹

The Biblical narrative of Noah and the ark seems so far-fetched that historians have long doubted that it could have had any serious relationship to reality. Then, in 1929, after seven seasons of digging, Sir Leonard Woolley of the British Museum reported the amazing discoveries of his expedition at Ur of the Chaldees. When the workmen had declared that they had already come to the very bottom of the site—to the silt of the river bed—Sir Leonard realized that they were still too high up, and that perhaps they might yet be able to dig still further. It was then, after instructing them to go down deeper, that the unexpected happened. The spades uncovered only clean clay—without any traces of stone implements, pottery, or other objects—for a full eight feet. Then, at the bottom of the clean clay, an exciting change in the soil content was discovered: here there were hand-painted ware, flint stones and other remains of civilized life. Woolley and his colleagues recognized that they had come upon a major discovery, for the great bed of clay marked a break in the continuity of history. Above the clean, unmarked clay lay the remains of a great civilization, and below it, too, were reminders of permanent human structures and other signs of a

¹ Gen 7 19.

Modern Aids to Bible Study

living culture. The eight feet of unmarked sediment could be accounted for only by some extraordinary inundation, so unusual and precedent-shattering that it had to mark a clear break in the continuity of culture. Woolley could only conclude that a whole civilization which existed before the Flood had been submerged in its waters, and, when a new civilization was built atop the total destruction, it had no connection or link with the past.

That torrential rainfalls must have occurred in those days, as they do in ours, seems likely. But Woolley's discovery proves that we are dealing here with nothing ordinary. The empty eight feet of clay by its silence reveals that some monumental inundation had covered the whole area, obliterating all traces of its culture.

The consequences of this phenomenon of nature were obviously tremendous—an entire civilization was wiped out.²

This revealing archaeological discovery does not, of course, "prove" the historical truth of the Biblical story of the Flood, Noah and his ark. But it does help us understand how the Biblical authors functioned; they took the factual events of the Flood—a catastrophic and horrifying human tragedy—and gave them the only interpretation which made sense from their religious and ethical point of view. For them, only violent and unrepentant human disobedience to the divine law could have brought on such vast and profound devastation. A whole new world had to be built upon the ruins of the older evil one. And so Noah was chosen as the only survivor of a corrupt generation, and to him was given the mandate to help create a braver and fairer one.

² See Sir Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees* (London: Penguin Books, 1950).

The Bible Is for You

We may dispute the editorial judgments of the Biblical authors, or debate their moral evaluation of what appear to be only natural phenomena. But now that archaeology has shed its penetrating light, we may no longer accuse them of having written fairy tales. They were dealing with facts. The way in which they interpreted those facts makes the Bible a religious book, not merely a journalistic, eyewitness report of the past.

What a Single Word Can Do to Change History

The Hebrew Bible (II Kings 23:29) describes King Josiah as going to his end when he went out in battle against Pharaoh Necho, at Megiddo. The verse has always been read in this manner: "In his [Josiah's] days, Pharaoh Necho king of Egypt went up against the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates; and king Josiah went against him; and he slew him [Josiah] at Megiddo, when he had seen him." Thus, it had always been understood that Josiah was loyal to his Assyrian overlord, and went out in his behalf to fight the Egyptian Pharaoh. But how could a fettered Josiah also be the totally dedicated, religious reformer, the supremely devoted, spiritual-minded king which the text makes of him? If Josiah were really only a vassal of Assyria, and indeed went to his death fighting for a foreign king, the picture which the Bible presents of an independent fervently nationalistic leader seems completely out of keeping.

But a Babylonian tablet was dug up and deciphered in 1923 which showed that the fall of Nineveh did not take place in 606 B.C.E. as had been thought, but in 612. From this we learned, too, that Assyria was *helped* by Egypt, who sent

forces to her aid in 616. Here, then, is a Josiah who is clearly *anti*-Assyrian, and the religious zeal which prompts the Bible to say of him that there was "no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might . . . neither after him arose there any like him"³ is patently true. Far from being a vassal he went to his death, fighting for his independence against a coalition of Egypt and Assyria.

Yet while the tablets make all of this clear, what are we to make of the Biblical verse quoted above which says that in Josiah's days "Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt went up against the king of Assyria"? On the face of it, the Bible is at odds with the tablets which tell us that the two kings were in alliance! This is precisely where the archaeological find has helped us to realize that we had been mistranslating the text all along! One Hebrew word, *al*—a single preposition—had always been translated as meaning "against"—the king of Egypt went up *against* the king of Assyria. Now, archaeology comes along and helps us find the correct translation—not *agamst*, but *for*; not to *battle* Assyria, but to *aid* Assyria!

In a sense, by our learning the correct translation of a single word, Josiah's reputation has been saved; he was a thorough-going patriot, not a satellite! He did not die fighting for a foreign power, but for the independence of his own people against the combined odds of two empires. But it is not the clearing of Josiah's name that dramatically emerges from the deciphered Babylonian tablet—it is the validity of the text. And not this alone, important as it may be. An even greater lesson is underscored: despite our belief that we understand the language of the Bible, we are still learning how to read

³ II Kings 23:25

The Bible Is for You

it! It may not be wrong to suggest that many obscure or seemingly inconsistent Biblical passages will yet be cleared up when we find better keys with which to unlock the mysteries of their language and their nuance.

Omissions That Are Telltale

In the fifth chapter of the first Book of Kings there is a brief description of a treaty which was made between Hiram of Tyre and King Solomon. After extolling the virtues of Solomon's wisdom and wealth, the Biblical editors quickly pass over the economic factors which were at the heart of the pact between the monarchs and hastily proceed to their own purpose. They are obviously interested in Hiram's covenant with Solomon for one reason only: they had to explain how it was that Hiram and his craftsmen played so important a role in the building of Solomon's temple. Once this matter is attended to, they hasten to write two lengthy chapters describing the architecture, design and adornments of the Temple, and all with great attention to delicate detail and a complete lack of reticence.

The omissions of the editors here and elsewhere in the Bible are most telltale. They had few, if any, economic interests, their main preoccupation was with the religious life of their people. They were content to note that Solomon's ships fetched from Ophir great treasures—but were apparently unconcerned with the need to describe just how these treasures were acquired. Apparently, then, the editors were primarily interested in what they considered to be the vital essence of Jewish history—the religious and theological data. We turn to their record seeking to unravel the fuller story

Modern Aids to Bible Study

and wonder why they did not describe the things in which we are interested—the socioeconomic sphere.

It is precisely at this juncture that many turn away from the text, describing it as either faulty or invalid; it does not tell the story straight. But a more mature perspective might guide us to see Scripture on its own terms. Viewed this way, it is neither faulty nor invalid; it is incomplete, and consciously so. The editors were not concerned with that which we should have desired them to be—and for good reason. Solomon was a mighty and wealthy king whose biography, had it been written by other than the Biblical editors, might very well have been slanted primarily toward the material side of his success. But the Scriptural authors consciously played down this very side of his career, in order not to mar what they considered to be the larger purpose of his rule—the establishment of God's House in Jerusalem. Often, then, the silent spaces of the Bible speak more eloquently than had they been filled in.

This truth becomes even more sharply pointed when the veil of silence is pierced by the amazing discoveries of archaeology. Thanks to Nelson Glueck's excavations we now know a great deal about the economic side of Solomon's career. Dr. Glueck dug up, at Ezion-geber, what he later called "the Pittsburgh of Palestine, as well as its most important port." There he found an extraordinary structure built especially to smelt the copper ore which was dug from the mines of near-by Sinai and Edom. Ezion-geber "was planned in advance, and built with considerable architectural and engineering skill at one time as an integral whole."⁴ Copper was cast

⁴ Nelson Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), chs. 3, 4; also his *Rivers in the Desert* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 150-73.

The Bible Is for You

there into ingots, and then bartered for the gold and silver, the ivory and the incense of distant lands. The result was a fabulously wealthy kingdom whose commerce extended to remote countries via a vast shipping line. It was, undoubtedly, the grave competition to the lucrative caravan routes controlled by the Queen of Sheba which prompted her to come to Jerusalem with all manner of presents in order to conclude an amicable trade agreement with Solomon.

Nothing like King Solomon's copper mines is known anywhere else in the ancient Near East, yet if we were to search the Biblical account we would not even know about them. The discovery of archaeology in this instance—and undoubtedly in others yet to come—helps to highlight the silence of the text. By what the Bible has left unsaid—now that we have the exciting evidences of what it could have said—there is eloquent testimony, not of the truth of the Bible, but of what it considered worthy of being remembered as truth.

Contradictions That Can Be Explained

In the twelfth century, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra hinted at a problem which six hundred years later broke out in the open, and all but destroyed the sanctified and protected position of the Bible. He noted the difficulties of accepting the belief in the single authorship of the Pentateuch by a man called Moses. By the end of the nineteenth century a formidable scientific position had been built up, based upon what was known as the Graf-Wellhausen theory. Scholars were determined to study the Hebrew Bible with the same critical methodology that was applied to the study of any other literature—the Hindu Vedas, the Homeric poems or the plays of

Modern Aids to Bible Study

Shakespeare. At its best, however, this "higher criticism" of the Bible was not an attempt to vindicate faith in its battles with science; it wanted to present the faithful with a rational explanation of the inner contradictions of the Bible text itself. As one writer succinctly put it: "Confronted with evolutionary theory, they [the "higher critics"] might conceivably have reconciled Genesis I with Darwin, but they could not reconcile Genesis I with Genesis II."⁵

To be sure, many "higher critics" did not approach their task without spurious motives. Too many of them were actuated by a desire born of intolerance—to prove that the Hebrew Bible was inferior to the ethics and religious teachings of the New Testament. They did not always approach the Old Testament for its own values; rather, they looked upon it as the "primitive" forerunner of a higher testament—the New.

It is no small wonder, therefore, that many devout Christian laymen who respected the revealed character of the Old Testament, as well as many Jewish scholars, could not easily be persuaded of the merits of the "higher Biblical criticism." The late Solomon Schechter, noted Jewish discoverer of ancient Jewish manuscripts in the Genizah of Cairo, and a first rate scientific scholar himself, once said that the "higher criticism" of the Bible was little more than the "higher anti-Semitism."

Yet, if approached objectively, higher criticism need not be confused with theological evaluation or speculation; it should be concerned only with the subject matter as it lies before the student. If the material appears contradictory and seems to be the product of different hands and of gradual

⁵ T. H. Robinson, in Peake, *op. cit.*, p. 153

The Bible Is for You

growth, the critic seeks to discover the original nucleus of ideas, to sift out and arrange the various sections so that they follow a logical sequence of development. His principal purpose is to offer the Bible student a rational explanation of what often seems to be a somewhat raveled and tangled story. His function is to get at the fullness of the Biblical message by helping the student find the continuous threads which tie the entire fabric together. Always, however, his method must be a means, not an end.

This is why the critic, no less the fundamentalist, can be a reverent student of the text. While the fundamentalist sees no problems and refuses to deal logically with contradictions, the critic is concerned lest, in the absence of intelligible explanation, the Bible be reduced to a hodgepodge of fantasy and fable in the eyes of contemporary man. The critic can say to the fundamentalist: "Like you, I maintain a belief in the Bible as a God-inspired work. While I call attention to its contradictions, I did not create them. I seek to explain them in ways that will make belief more cogent, and thus, more vital."

But while this does not satisfy the fundamentalist for reasons which we yet will examine, on the whole the work of the critics has been of basic help in rendering the Bible intelligible to our Age of Analysis. It seems fairly clear that without such aid many who continue to find meaning in the Bible as a valid religious document would have been lost to its message.

How has the method helped? An examination of one major example will shed light.

Modern Aids to Bible Study

The Creation Story

Despite ardent attempts of literalists to use quibbling rationalizations to deny it, a basic contradiction in fact, let alone a vast difference in concept, is found in the "two" stories of Creation which appear in the first chapters of Genesis. Traditional Jewish commentators, also, were obviously faced with the problem of the contradictory sequence: in Chapter I man is created *after* the animals, while in Chapter II he is created *before* them. They serenely overlooked the difficulty, suggesting that Chapter II is but a sequel to the first chapter—a sequel which begins the account of the story of man, of Adam and his family and what befalls them.⁶ Even if one were to accept this view as regards the problem of sequence, it is most apparent that the style, sophistication and even the "scientific" attitudes of Chapter II contrast widely with those of the first chapter. The first chapter seems clearly Hebraic with its emphasis upon the majestic beginnings of the universe, its stately and orderly movement from the simplest of forms to the more complex, its moral and cosmic optimism marching toward the high goal—the creation of the human species as the crowning glory.⁷ When one compares this epic

⁶ Here they did *not* invoke their oft-stated principle: "there is neither 'early' nor 'late' in the Bible," meaning that Scripture does not always follow a strict chronological sequence. Undoubtedly, they preferred not to call attention to the problem of chronological discrepancies at all, but to see the two stories as one—with Chapter II merely highlighting the side of Creation which dealt with the history of the first man. In many other places, however, they dealt with the sequential disparities of the text, by enunciating their above-mentioned "principle."

⁷ Under the influence of the story in Chapter II, verses 26 and 27 of Chapter I may have been misread. "And God said. Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of

The Bible Is for You

description with the story of Creation as given in Chapter II, the latter pales in literary and philosophical significance. For there, the hinge of the narrative is the Garden of Eden, and man is not only created before the animals—he turns out to be a mere watchman and tiller of the divine garden. Dissatisfied with the companionship of the animals who dwelled with him in the garden, he is finally given a helpmeet whom he can truly call his own—a woman, “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.” Here the grandeur and the sweep of the Hebrew story of Creation is missing. All of its majesty—as recorded in Chapter I—seems to be dissipated in the myth of the Garden.

Now, let it be clear that, from a religious point of view, as we shall see, it is quite possible to read important ethical and spiritual truths *out of* the story of Chapter II—out of the very myth of Eden. Chapter I leads up to the creation of a morally purposeful mankind—and not merely to the story of a single man—while Chapter II goes off in a different direction, emphasizing the creation, from the very first, of a solitary human being. Yet, it was from the latter, not the former, that Jewish religious tradition derived incisive ethical insights, valid religiously, even if not in conformity with the precepts of Dar-

the seas and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.” Clearly, Adam, which is translated as man, and which therefore has led us to assume that only a single male human being was first created, does not necessarily mean “man.” Adam may very well be a collective term and thus denotes the creation of the whole human species. Thus in the following verse, the phrase, “male and female created He them,” comes to mean precisely what it says—the whole human race—not just a man and a woman. We should probably have understood the Bible to mean just this, were it not necessary to try to square the two creation stories of chapters I and II, by making them appear to be really one and the same.

Modern Aids to Bible Study

winian evolution. Why was only a single man created, asked the rabbis, whilst all the lower creatures were made in vast numbers? To teach a spiritual truth, they replied: if there were more than one Adam, men of later generations might claim superiority over each other, on the basis of "better" ancestors. To avoid such divisions between mankind, a common humanity was created with a single family tree going back to a *single, common father*. One God—one humanity!

Nevertheless, it is still necessary to recognize the existence, side by side, of two separate and differing Creation stories. Yet, as we will learn even more emphatically later, to accept the critical suggestion that contradictions do exist in the text does not destroy the *religious* significance of the Bible. It turns out that, for many, the critics have made the Bible even more credible. They explain that the story in Chapter I is a later version of Creation than the narrative in Chapter II. And both versions, they add, may go back to even earlier times than the period in which they were actually edited.

In the main, say the critics, there were four versions of most of the Biblical text, each edited at different periods in the history and development of Israel. This theory is the widely heralded "Documentary Hypothesis," which suggests that the Bible consists of the "J" (Jahwist), the "E" (Elohist), the "D" (Deuteronomist) and the "P" (Priestly Code) documents. These were supposed to have been brought together in the comprehensive collation now called the Bible, sometime about the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. But each of these, claim the critics, once existed as separate versions, until, at one time, "J" was joined to "E," then "JE" was added to "D," and finally "JED," when placed together with "P" became our present Bible. They do not say, however, that

The Bible Is for You

the word of God is not to be found in each of these "editions" as well as in their final combination. How to explain such a possibility, however, is left to the theologian. But the critics have done their task. They have sought to explain the historical reasons for the various conflicting and differing versions, styles and viewpoints of the Biblical text.

Theology and Psychology

IT WAS not until very recent decades that theologians—Jewish and Christian—began to reckon seriously with the findings of Biblical criticism. In the first flush which followed the development of criticism as a serious challenge to a literal interpretation of the text, it had been considered subversive of religious tradition. Theologians, whose business it is to justify the accepted teachings of their own faith, shied away, or worse, condemned it. It was not until the philosophers of religion, men like Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber among the Jews, and Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr among Christians, began to seek a rapprochement between faith and scholarship that a change in attitude became discernible among theologians and other professional religionists.

How did this come about?

The fundamentalists, or literalists, conceive of the Bible as the body of writings which are immune from error because they are literally the writings of God, through a supernatural revelation. Everything in the Bible, from their point

The Bible Is for You

of view, is equally factual and therefore true, for God Himself dictated the text.

On the other hand, Biblical criticism gave rise to a certain cynicism with regard to the text, culminating in a point of view which reads the Bible with secularist eyes. For the secular modernist, the findings of the scholarly critics "prove" that the Bible, while interesting as a cultural relic of the ancient world, and worthy of study for some of its ethical insights, is little more than a compilation of legends, folklore and early mythology. This "primitive" writing, say modern secularists, cannot be the revelation of God. It is, at best, "inspired" writing, but surely not the divine word.

A third way—one that is distinct from either of these positions—has come to be acknowledged, as the study of anthropology began to be approached from a spiritual and not only a cultural point of view. It is to the religious existentialists that we owe a vote of gratitude for shedding light on the role and meaning of myth in the inner life of man. They, above all others, have helped us to understand that mythology is quite other than what we had believed it to be.

We now recognize mythology to be the *philosophy* of the ancients (or of moderns, for that matter) rather than their *science*. A myth is an attempt to interpret reality, not to describe it. Often our approach to the mythological elements in the Bible is confused because of our inability to discern the basic difference between an interpretation and a description of reality. Paul Tillich has incisively described the place of myth in religion:

. . . the world of the myth, great and strange, [is] always changing but fundamentally [is] the same: man's ultimate con-

Theology and Psychology

cern symbolized in divine figures and actions. *Myths are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters.*

Myths are always present in every act of faith, because the language of faith is the symbol. . . . It uses material from our ordinary experience. It puts the stories of the gods into the framework of time and space although it belongs to the nature of the ultimate to be beyond time and space.

Monotheism also falls under the criticism of the myth. It needs, as one says today, "demythologization." This word has been used in connection with the elaboration of the mythical elements in stories and symbols of the Bible . . . all the stories in which divine-human interactions are told are considered as mythological in character, and objects of demythologization. What does this negative and artificial term mean? It must be accepted and supported if it points to the necessity of recognizing a symbol as a symbol and a myth as a myth. It must be attacked and rejected if it means the removal of symbols and myths altogether. . . . It is an attempt which can never be successful, because symbol and myth are forms of human consciousness which are always present. *One can replace one myth by another, but one cannot remove the myth from man's spiritual life. For the myth is the combination of symbols of our ultimate concern.*

. . . All mythological elements in the Bible, and doctrines and liturgy should be recognized as mythological, but they should be maintained in their symbolic form and not be replaced by scientific substitutes. For there is no substitute for the use of symbols and myths: they are the language of faith.¹

Clearly, then, high religious faith cannot take its myths literally—for the myth is couched in the language of symbols, and symbols are intended to be instrumental, not ultimate.

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958), pp. 49-52.

The Bible Is for You

"Faith," Tillich exhorts, "conscious of the symbolic character of its symbols, gives God the honor which is due him . . . if it takes its symbols, literally, it becomes idolatrous." But neither can men do away with these symbols of faith. They cannot, Tillich concludes, "be replaced by other symbols, such as artistic ones, and they cannot be removed by scientific criticism. They have a genuine standing in the human mind, just as science and art have. Their symbolic character is their truth and their power. *Nothing less than symbols and myths can express our ultimate concern.*"²

To this approach to the mythological elements in Scripture is added the concept of "Biblical realism." The religious existentialists stress their belief that "revelation is the self-disclosure of God in his dealings with the world." Because He deals with man, meets him and confronts him, God is always mediated by human beings. As a result, revelation in the Bible cannot be what the fundamentalists assert it to be: a record of infallible communication. For God communicates to fallible man, and man hears as a man, not as a god.

But neither is the Bible merely the output of "inspired" poets and prophets, speaking only from within themselves, as the secular modernists claim. Not *all of Scripture* is revelation, answer the theologians: there is, however, the revelation of God, His self-disclosure to man, *in Scripture*. For the Bible is the classical record of man's encounter with God.

This idea of the divine-human encounter or confrontation is one of the most popular concepts presently being discussed in theological circles. While this volume is not essentially an exposition of theology, we should not leave this subject without explaining this matter more carefully. What do the theo-

² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Theology and Psychology

logians mean when they speak of "man's encounter with God"?

Martin Buber is primarily responsible for laying stress upon this aspect of the religious life. Indeed, for him and those under his influence the "divine-human encounter" is very much the principal issue and the basic definition of religion. Buber is not only a student of ancient cultures but is also strongly influenced by the new depth psychology, and his ideas and teachings obviously reflect this. For Buber, the "dialogue" between man and God is experienced as an intimate "I-Thou" and not an "I-It" relationship, and is at the very core of the religious life. For him, it is this experience which one discovers as the fundamental message of the Bible.

To simplify the matter, it is necessary to understand that Buber came to his idea of the dialogue as an "I-Thou" relationship between man and God only after recognizing this factor in the psychological and emotional life of man. It is closely related to the psychological principle of empathy. The simplest way to explain empathy is to describe what happens to us when we engage in or observe an athletic event where the body is involved. Actually, much more than the body is involved whether we bowl or watch someone else bowl, play football or see a game from the stands. The bowler sways in the direction he hopes the ball will roll, as if to influence its course with his bodily motion. People in the grandstands watching a game of football heave with the forward motion of the line, swing their own hips with the runner—as if they were themselves helping the teams to win.

In virtually all true artistic experience, empathy is also present. If the individual is to experience an artistic feeling,

The Bible Is for You

he must, in some way, identify as well as communicate with the object. This is why people are "carried away" by music, or "moved to tears" by the beauty of a violin, an actor's performance, or a colorful and dramatic sunset. Aristotle taught that a dramatic tragedy purges the soul of the viewer because the tragedy is "enacted on the stage of his soul" as he watches it on the real stage.

But the way in which we converse is perhaps the most tell-tale way in which to gauge and understand how empathy works. In every good conversation, where there is real dialogue, empathy is present. Our conversation must take something out of us if we are to enter the very heart of the other person. If we are to be successful in truly *meeting another human being*, we must be able to "walk with him into the very deepest chambers of his soul."

Alfred Adler, the eminent psychologist, got to the very core of the meaning of empathy, and from his description we begin to understand better what Buber is suggesting by the divine-human encounter. Adler wrote:

Empathy occurs in the moment one human being speaks with another. It is impossible to understand another individual if it is impossible at the same time to identify one's self with him. . . . If we seek for the origin of this ability to act and feel as if we were someone else, we can find it in the existence of an inborn social feeling. This is, as a matter of fact, *a cosmic feeling and a reflection of the connectedness of the whole cosmos which lives in us; it is an inescapable characteristic of being a human being.*³ (Italics mine.)

³ Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature*, (New York, Greenberg, 1927), pp. 60-61.

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Theology and Psychology

If we meet other people merely as "its," as impersonal cogs in a gigantic wheel of life, we never really know them. Only when we can address them intimately, as an "I" speaking to a "Thou," is there a possibility of entering into their lives and of establishing a sense of interrelatedness. Buber tells how he moved toward an understanding of man's relationship to God by recognizing the truest relationship of man to man. As a young man he had spent many and consecutive mystical hours in detached religious exaltation. One day, following such a period of isolation, he was approached by a young man in trouble. Only later did Buber learn that this man had attached an importance of life and death to this interview. Yet during the time that they were together, Buber was not really and fully present in spirit; he conversed, answered questions put to him, but did not look behind the questions to the man's real quest—the assurance that life was not empty and futile, but had meaning and significance. Later, Buber learned of the death of this young man in World War I, and of the importance which he had attached to this conversation. Then, he realized, that because of his *religious detachment he was not truly religious*. He underwent a conversion, gave up his quest for religious ecstasy. "Since then," he recalls, "I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility." ⁴

Which is to explain why Buber and his fellow existentialist philosophers place so much stress upon the formation of personality and an understanding of man's character structure. They emphasize again and again that the revelation of God *in* Scripture cannot reach us unless as individuals we listen as

⁴ This story is quoted in Leonard Gross, *God and Freud* (New York; David McKay Co., 1959), pp. 95-96.

The Bible Is for You

persons. "The word is spoken to him," says Buber, "as between person and person and he must be in the full sense of the word a *person* before God can speak to him."⁵

It will be useful for us, then, to turn our attention to the manner in which the Bible understands what we now call psychology, how it views personality, and in what ways it suggests a maturer understanding of the human psyche on the part of those to whom it speaks.

With Buber we must understand that the Bible message is addressed to us as persons. If we go beyond the *events* recorded, seeing in them more than history, we can appreciate what it is the Bible intends us to hear. The voice which echoes out of Scripture also addresses us, in the very midst of our own lives; if it does not, there is little chance that the fundamental religious meaning of the Bible will be grasped. To be sure, there are long and continuous sections of the text which seem to be little more than a recitation of sterile, archival material. But we must recognize that the Scriptural writers truly believed that religion and history were not unrelated. For them, God participated in the entire drama of life; surely, then, He was not to be missing from the events of history. Thus, the authors looked upon history as more than something which *had happened*; rather, *they considered it be something which continues to happen*. Egypt was not only a thing of the past, but an ongoing, continuing phenomenon. God was active; He was not a passive object of contemplation. He was a living God, neither defeated nor dead.

By the religious discipline of events, the writers sought to teach Israel and the world the meaning of redemption in the

⁵ Maurice Freedman, *Martin Buber. The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 247.

Theology and Psychology

unfolding of history. They saw these events through "glorified memory," and intended them as sources of instruction for attentive hearts. The great stories of Creation, the Flood and the Tower of Babel describe events; but these events, in their factual sense, are not what concerned the Biblical editors. They were describing God's work in history—and this they understood as an ever-recurring, ever-present, ever-relevant force.

Yet the most striking parts of the Bible, its deepest reaches, do not deal with an objective recording of isolated *events*. Its profoundest probes are those which deal with the lives of *persons*, or with events that unfold in biographical portrayal. The richest messages, by far, are those which are imbedded in the lives of its heroes. And the way in which their spiritual biographies is written is exceedingly telltale.

Virtually all of these, whether they tell of Abraham or Jacob, Joseph, Moses or David share a single, central theme: the changing fortunes of all men and the changeless purpose of God. What man calls success or victory is not what God so considers—and it seems that all of these Biblical heroes were purposely selected to drive home this central idea. Man believes that it is the strong who are capable of performing the highest historical deeds. But the Biblical here is often precisely the humble one, the weaker one, the younger one. Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim, Moses and David—all were the younger sons.

Joseph makes himself hated by his brothers because of his farfetched dreams. They try to kill him, but he escapes. When he is imprisoned, he shows kindness to his fellow prisoners, but they forget him. He becomes a savior of his people—but his success leads to failure: the families of Israel remain

The Bible Is for You

in Egypt, and are enslaved for more than four centuries.

Even before his birth, Moses is threatened with death. Cherished by his loving mother, he was somehow saved. He grows up in wealth and protection as an Egyptian, casts in his lot with his Israelite brothers, and finds that he must now flee the land. He returns as their deliverer, but then endures the years of wandering under threats, insults and misunderstanding. He never gets to the land of promise, dies with only a vision of it, from afar.

The Bible often records "failures," in order to teach that they are, in fact, successes. Sometimes, as in the story of Moses, it is explicit. God selects the man who is "slow of speech and of a slow tongue" to stand before the Pharaoh as the deliverer of his people. Nor can Isaiah see himself as worthy of carrying the divine word. He says: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips."⁶ Or He singles out Jeremiah, the man who complains that "I cannot speak, for I am a child," as the teacher of men, "to root out and to pull down, and to destroy, and to overthrow; to build and to plant."⁷ He who regards himself as incapable of speaking out for God to his people is often the very one whom God chooses.

Sometimes the Bible is more subtle and only hints at an extended meaning, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Indeed, the narrator often means much more than he says in words, allowing us to supply by our religious intuition what is clearly latent in his own purpose. When Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, we are only told that "he rose early in the morning, and saddled his

⁶ See Isa. 6 5.

⁷ See Jer. 1-9-10.

ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac, his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up and went unto the place of which God had told him." What Abraham felt as he went forward at God's word, we are not told; we are left on our own, and must ourselves supply the words purposely omitted. But an even more striking and therefore telltale omission occurs between this verse and the one which immediately follows. At the close of the previous verse, Abraham is on his way; at the beginning of the next verse *two full days have elapsed*: "On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off."⁸

A careful reader of the text cannot fail to take note of this glaring omission. What happened to Abraham during those two fateful, fretful days? The narrator must surely have desired us to ponder the pain and inner torture which must have beset Abraham as he trudged his way nearer the appointed place. It is part of the narrator's skill to keep silent when the human crisis reaches a point that goes beyond the power of human speech. His silence leads us to contemplate the unspoken inner speech. For Abraham was not silent within: he must have looked deeply within himself to penetrate his own life and work, in the quest to understand his mortal failure. May we not suppose that during these two tortuous days about which no Biblical word is spoken, Abraham was filled with remorse over his own life? May he not have believed that if God had put this heavy burden upon him there must have been just cause for his suffering—a cause that inhered in him, and not in God? Abraham broods silently; his life is a failure. And yet he does not hesitate; he goes forward to meet God. When, indeed, the narrative

⁸ See Gen 22:1-5.

The Bible Is for You

proves otherwise—that the man who may have thought himself to be a failure is successful in the eyes of God, because he *unhesitatingly followed the divine command*—have we not a poignant example of the personality type which the Bible seeks to exalt?

The successful man is measured by his decisive acts—a Biblical standard which is at odds with what the world regards as being “natural.” This is an important clue to the way in which Scripture looks upon the ultimate human purpose—Erich Fromm regards it as a unique contribution to our understanding of human well-being.⁹ Other systems outside of the Hebrew Bible seek to find ultimate truth in the right thought and the right belief. This emphasis on “belief in God” as the principal aim of the religious personality leads to the formulation of dogmas, and an infinite number of arguments over “truth.” But the Biblical imperative is *not to believe in a belief* in God—but rather *to participate in* God, with one’s whole person, to *live* God, not merely to believe in Him. Thus its crucial emphasis is upon the deed and the morally directed act. Of course, a belief in God is presupposed—it is implicit in every moral act; but belief by itself is only speculative and contemplative. The act of *living* right requires our total personality, our entire being, whilst *believing* right exercises only a fractional part of our selves.

This strong emphasis on right action over against right belief runs through the Hebrew Bible. The great sin of idolatry, which the Law, the Prophets and the Psalmists take great pains to elaborate, is not a *theological* sin; it is a *moral* one. The immoral and subhuman practices of the idolaters,

⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), pp. 78–80

Theology and Psychology

not merely their farfetched thoughts about God, are the real targets of the prophetic diatribes. (Indeed, some might even read the story of Abraham and Isaac in similar fashion, calling attention to its final, dramatic denouement: "And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering instead of his son." [Gen. 22:13]. The idolaters feed children to the gods; a monotheist does not!)

In Isaiah we find a clear-cut summary of this position:

For our transgressions are multiplied before Thee,
And our sins testify against us,
For our transgressions are present to us,
And as for our iniquities, we know them:
Transgressing and denying the Lord,
And turning away from following our God,
Speaking oppression and perverseness,
Conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood.
And justice is turned away backward,
And righteousness standeth afar off;
For truth hath stumbled in the broad place,
And uprightness cannot enter.¹⁰

Someone has cleverly suggested that, for moderns, the commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," should be changed to read: "Thou shalt have at least one God." In our time, atheism is possible, and thus we assume that the matter of having "right belief" was always a crucial religious issue. But for the people of Scripture to have *no* belief was *impossible*; not to believe in the God of Israel

¹⁰ See Isa. 59:12-15.

The Bible Is for You

meant to believe in the false gods of their neighbors. What made these gods false—as the Biblical record amply testifies—was the fact that they were not identified with a life-giving force; they had not the power to *perform* righteousness, to *establish* the moral law and to endow creaturely men with the *will to live with and in God, as moral men*. Indeed, this is precisely the way in which the two myths of creation can be made to coalesce from a religious point of view. The first chapter of Genesis describes the coming of nature into being, in the second and third chapters the Creation is described in terms of the rise of history. In the first chapter, man is “made in God’s image”; in the other story, in spite of God, man becomes “as one of us”—a divineline creature—the very moment he learns to discern the difference between good and evil. In other words, what establishes the true divinity of the Scriptural God are not the *impersonal*, inescapable facts of nature, for He is more than the Creator. Uniquely, the Bible considers Him divine because He is also the Author of history. And there can be no history without persons—whole-hearted persons, to use the Biblical idiom. This is what makes this God true, and no other: He created *persons*, who are capable of choosing truth by living it! This is precisely the way in which the Jewish tradition has always understood Habakkuk’s classical statement: “The righteous man shall live by his faithfulness [to the moral law of God].”¹¹ Christian theologians, following Paul’s emphasis on faith versus good works, read the Hebrew of Habakkuk—*emunah*—to signify “faith.” But the Hebrew Bible does not know the word “faith” as theological belief—only as faithfulness to God, on the part of moral creatures. Man *lives faithfully*; this is

¹¹ See Hab. 2.4.

Theology and Psychology

what makes him righteous. And he lives within history—not beyond it; he lives with his whole being, as a whole person, with his body as with his spirit.

This is why, it goes without saying, the Hebrew will marry—"a man cleaves to his wife," and a woman longs for a man (Gen. 3:16) and both seek "to be fruitful and multiply." So unusual is the bachelor that the Hebrew Bible has no word for it. In all of Scripture there is no mention of a theme familiar elsewhere—the tragedy of unhappy lovers who may not come together.

The Greeks, of course, and those influenced by them, knew such tragedy—life was filled with tensions—because they were essentially dualistic. Man's soul, they believed, was incarnated in a human body, the two representing contending and conflicting forces. The soul was the seat of the spirit; the body the fountain of lust and carnal desire. Biblical authors, however, made no such distinction. For them, the psychical, the ethical and the physical sides of man were undivided; they were part of the whole, all acting in coordination. For the Hebrew, the idea of personality is linked to an animated body and not to an incarnated soul.

Nor is this mere accident or caprice. They believed that the consciousness of man was totally permeated, throughout his body, with the ethical qualities which they considered divine. God made man in his image: his bodily form, therefore, reflected the qualities of *moral* value which made him a divine creature. Thus, in Biblical Hebrew, "heart" (*lev*) is not only a physical organ—it is the center of the mental activities of human consciousness. The kidneys (*k'layot*) are the physical seat of emotional activities. The liver, too, is sometimes regarded as the location of the human

The Bible Is for You

life center. Virtually all parts of the human body have a moral endowment; and these references may not be read as mere poetic "figures of speech." The author of Proverbs should be understood literally when he writes:

There are six things which the Lord hateth,
Yea, seven which are an abomination to Him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And hands that shed innocent blood;
A heart that deviseth wicked thoughts,
Feet that are swift in running to evil;
A false witness that breatheth out lies,
And he that soweth discord among brethren.¹²

And the Psalter condemns those who speak with "flattering lip" and "with double heart," because they do not have "clean hands" and a "pure heart." The right hand is considered the hand of righteous action, the left of evil. Thus Nineveh's inhabitants cannot discern between "their right hand and their left hand."¹³ And "a wise man's understanding is at his right hand; but a fool's understanding at his left."¹⁴

Sometimes, certain modern writers, attempting to show the contemporary relevance of the Scriptural outlook, use examples of this kind to "prove" the modernity of these ancients: the *psyche* (spirit) and the *soma* (body), they say, were as one for the Hebrews, even as our age now recognizes that man is a psychosomatic indivisibility. We can have no argument with such "proof." The essential religious, not the scientific message of the Hebrew view of personality, must

¹² See Prov. 6 16-19.

¹³ See Jonah 4 11.

¹⁴ See Eccles. 10 2.

Theology and Psychology

not be missed in our haste to claim for the Bible a "scientific validity." And it is this: all of man is divine and man cannot truly come before the divine without all of himself. It is the whole man, then, who can become a person, and only persons are capable of self-fulfillment.

It is to that height to which the Bible beckons: the ever-deepening experience of oneself. This we are capable of achieving through divine powers which are available to us, to transform ourselves from mere individuals into total persons.

With these views in sight we are now better prepared to make our journey to some of the places of spiritual adventure which the Bible abundantly possesses.

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PART TWO

Tales for Adults

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The Greatest Art

WITHOUT doubt, there can be no science. But without a sense of wonder, a spirit of reverence and a keen insight into the depths of life, there could be no religion.

We gain knowledge by the scientific method if we are willing to challenge every fact, deny every alleged truth, investigate every supposed reality. Through challenge, denial and investigation we come to learn and to know.

But to know something is not to understand it. Analysis of an idea does not necessarily give us its penetrating insight. A literary critic may dissect a poem; only a poet can create it.

This is why a photograph of a scene is not the same as the artist's painting of it. To be sure, the former attempts to be objective, while the latter can only be personal and subjective. But all insights are drawn from the inner world of man's thought. They are not the careful results of probes and gauges, of tests or measurements.

An artist, therefore, makes no claims of knowing anything. But he tries to understand everything. And he does this

The Bible Is for You

by a method that is a scandal to the scientific mind. He does this through an intimate interaction with the world that surrounds him.

He does this by being a participant and not a detached observer. If he were only eyes, he would be a camera, if only mind, a computation machine.

But he has a sense of what is good or evil, beautiful or ugly, tragic or comical, grand or paltry. He is anything but objective. But as long as he is concerned with values and not statistics he can never completely divorce his own self from what he sees. The moment he loses his personal sense of wonder, of amazement and awe, he destroys his art and forfeits his mission.

Mature religion is the great art of life. It has no argument with science as long as science reports what it knows. But it suggests that beyond knowledge there is feeling; out of feeling there comes understanding, sometimes even wisdom. And it is wisdom that we need more than knowledge. Knowledge is the accumulation of facts. Wisdom tells us how to evaluate them.

The Bible's very first tale—the epic story of Creation—points in this direction. It suggests that the Bible is not a book of knowledge, but a book of wisdom. It is not a book of science, it is a book of art. At once it recommends: do not look here for dates, facts, figures, or you look in vain. Do not search for scientific answers to the making of the universe or the beginnings of human life. Genesis announces immediately that the Bible will not deal with astrophysics; neither is it a reference work on biology or zoology.

If the Bible is a book of art and a book of wisdom, what is its art, what is its wisdom? On its very first pages three

The Greatest Art

themes are established, three basic positions on the meaning of life which serve as a moral overture for the symphony yet to follow. Over and over again, in a succession of movement, we will be listening to its variations on these themes.

First is the unabashed opening affirmation: "In the beginning God created. . . ." The Author does not deal with the details of Creation; he does not specify the physical or genetic processes whereby the universe and life came into existence. That question is a scientific question in which he is not interested. He is concerned with the *fact* of creation; namely, that the world was not an accident, that it was not unplanned, that it did not spring into being chaotically. "In the beginning God!" For him, all of life flows from this joyful and exciting declaration. Given God, and the world with all of its sorrow and pain may still have meaning. Without Him, there is no ultimate meaning; nothing, not even our victories, our triumphs or our glories can have meaning. Not only a God who rules has been given here, but a creative God—a world of order, a system of laws, a scale of human values, a hierarchy of moral judgments and ethical priorities. Creation is not only God's—it is ours, to complete: "In the beginning God," but in the end, man.

Do not seek to prove Creation in the test tube of a laboratory—indeed, no scientist worthy of the name would admit that it is possible to disprove it. The thoughtful scientist can readily agree to a beginning which points to divine mind. No scientist has ever seen an electron, nor does he think that anyone ever could. Yet nothing is more real to a scientist than an electron. Most of us would call a table or a chair real because we can see it or touch it, but a scientist knows that the table and the chair are not real, even though these can be

The Bible Is for You

seen. To him, the chair and the table are nothing more than a swirling set of electric charges which he calls electrons. Reality to a scientist is not simply that which can be seen with the eye or touched with the hand. *Reality is that which is universally experienced!* The scientist who is also an artist—one who is wise, not only clever—understands that Creation can be believed in, even though one cannot prove it. Indeed, when Creation is believed in, even evolution becomes meaningful. For at every stage of the evolutionary changes we still need to supply an answer to the question. What caused the change?

This is what the second great teaching of Genesis underscores. It is not concerned with *how* man developed from the lower species. It is silent on that question. Genesis I says that man was created after all the other species had already been created. And man was created, according to the mythical-symbolical language of Genesis II, at the beginning of Creation. Scholars may tell us that the two stories of Creation conflict. Objectively, they may be right. But not to those who have found a spiritual insight hidden in the harmony of the two stories. An eternal paradox emerges. Man is nothing, like dust. Yet, he was created as the crown and pinnacle of all creation.

Some biologists tell us that man is descended from the ape. Genesis suggests that whatever man came from, he did not descend—he ascended. All of nature came before him, so that he might know and understand that he was set apart—from the ape and from the beasts, that he might grow and aspire in a world created purposefully and by divine plan. Yet he predominates—nature is in his hands, under his influence and pro-

The Greatest Art

tection. The astronomer asks: What is man? His answer may suggest that man is but a speck in a far-flung universe beyond his control. The biologist asks: What is man? He too may reply that man is but a near cousin to the ape. But Genesis suggests a greater wisdom: Remember: man is the astronomer, and the biologist. He is like dust, but there is a divine spark which animates the dust until it is illumined to think, to feel, to dream and to aspire.

What if we live in a world created by God? What if man is the crown of Creation, and the guardian of God's world? See the evil in the world, you say. Is this a good world created, or an unhappy valley of tears, a divine tragedy full of tricks for unsuspecting man?

The Bible—the Book of Wisdom—suggests otherwise. The third theme of Genesis proclaims: "And God saw that it was good."

The world in which we live, Genesis teaches, swings from paradise gained to paradise lost. The potential of man is hardly ever reached. The treasury of good is often outweighed by the treasury of evil. Yet, in spite of all this, Genesis teaches "and God saw that which He made and behold, it was very good." Both the *evil* and the *good* flow from the same God. God created darkness as well as light, the night, as the day. Without darkness there could be no light; without evil, no challenge to progress. Without the unknown, never the known. Without love's absence, no meaning to its abundant presence. Often we cannot understand why our portions of light, of goodness and of love do not fill our cups. This is part of the unknowable mystery of life. Remember: we are only creatures, not creators. But we do have intimations of

The Bible Is for You

what goodness can mean, and in spite of the sorrow that comes into our life we have also known love; we have seen light!

Genesis, above all, teaches us the meaning of the language of faith. We always have problems with that language. Words cannot easily communicate deeply felt emotions. This is because we never can see, hear, touch, taste or smell a powerful insight or a strong sentiment. And yet we must use language to convey our certainty and our conviction about our deepest feelings.

But it has its risks.

That is why there is so much misunderstanding abroad about what faith means in our lives. For man can only feebly describe his deepest feelings to others.

The language of faith is not the language of words. It is expressed in moods, in attitudes, in moments that transcend doubt and despair. It is the feeling of gratitude for the life of each day.

When we straitjacket faith into words, we are likely to be more concerned with what it *sounds* like and forget what it *feels* like. Or when we compress faith into images, we are apt to concentrate upon what it looks like.

We tend to think of religion as something that goes on only inside churches and synagogues, instead of knowing for ourselves the power we have within us, as spiritual beings, to meet life as total people.

Too many look upon faith as unreal until proven valid in the test tubes of scientific experiment. Faith, like a purple cow, cannot be real, they would say. Have you ever seen it?

The man of faith doesn't need to argue. He knows that for him "seeing isn't believing." Believing is seeing. Our eyes are

The Greatest Art

opened to the wonder of life when we learn that great art—to know how to look and what to look for.

The Bible opens with a guide to such vision. And in the stories that follow, new and helpful light continue to show us the way.

The Moral Punch Line

REBECCA and Jacob, Joseph and Jonah—who are they, when did they live and where are their biographies to be found?

It is doubtful if many college graduates could give accurate answers to these simple, classical questions unless they had been preparing to appear as contestants on some quiz program. But even if they did know the answers, fewer still would come off well with these pivotal, follow-up questions: What does the central event of their lives say to you? In what ways do their lives live in yours?

Most likely they would answer that they never really thought about these remote folk in this manner at all. These names are identified with their childhood; they come out of pleasant, not serious, tales.

As we have seen, the world's most serious book is also one of its most misunderstood. The Bible has been translated into virtually every living (and dead) human tongue. And yet, despite all that has been done to the Bible, in our society it is

The Moral Punch Line

often treated as a collection of fairy tales intended for children, good material for parents to read to their youngsters before bedtime; it is pleasant enough. Comic books have done well with them, and film producers, ever in search of wide-screen material, have successfully appropriated Bible tales for some of their colossal technicolor spectacles.

In the popular mind, Bible stories are still the subject of religious education on the most elementary and childish levels. Some have suggested that many young people must believe that the children of Israel are still in the land of Egypt, for most of them have never gone much beyond the Book of Genesis; they have never reached Exodus!

On the level of scholarship, as we have seen, more has been discovered about the Bible in the past half century than in any previous period in history. Archaeology has come into its own during this time, and parts of the Biblical past have literally been unearthed, bit by bit. Whereas it had been the nineteenth-century intellectual sport to spoof Biblical historicity, it is not now so fashionable a game. Some of the spadework has tended to support the historical basis of the Scriptural record.

For theologians, too, the Bible is now having a religious renaissance. In the last century among liberal theologians who were seeking to harmonize the Bible with the world of Darwin and Spenser the social-reforming utterances of the prophets seemed to be the only part of the Bible worth quoting. These days, however, no responsible, modern theologian can avoid the Bible—indeed, he often bases his views upon what he calls the “mind of Biblical man.” Biblical man has become the father of a wide host of neo-orthodox theologies.

But because most people are neither historians nor theo-

The Bible Is for You

gians, the Bible still represents a remote world, it is a classical literature intended for that vanishing tribe, the classicists among the moderns. Yet, truth to tell, the Bible is neither history nor theology, although it touches on both. Because it is a literature which reflects the evolving human and national existence of a God-conscious people—Israel, obviously it casts many rays of light on both ancient history and religion. But so long as we moderns look upon it as being primarily a source book for these two rather esoteric fields of knowledge, that long will the Bible remain an unknown and unused book for contemporary men.

While the standard dictionary synonym for the Hebrew Bible is the word "law," to understand its purpose aright it should rather be rendered in harmony with its original meaning—"moral teaching." For despite the inclusion of a number of codes—the Ten Commandments, the Holiness Code, and so on—the law of the Bible is transmitted and interpreted through the medium of tales, biographical episodes and historical events as well. For this reason, Biblical law never emerges as a full-blown system or as a highly developed legal code. For in the Bible, law is also *taught*; it is not merely revealed. It is taught and made personally relevant by means of editorialized, ethically slanted reporting of events, which are not noted for the sake of the record as history, nor revealed by divinity as theology. The story, the tale or the myth are the central media for conveying the principal purpose of Scripture—moral teaching.

It has already been suggested that of the 613 commandments found in the Hebrew Bible, no one in particular commands a man "to believe in one God"—although, of course, every one of the commandments is centered in just such a

The Moral Punch Line

belief. Thus, the special hallmark of the Hebrew Bible is not its theological position, but rather its unique way of dealing with ethical issues. For that Bible is not, as the theologians would have us believe, a book which explains belief. It is not a book of ethical monotheism; it is principally concerned with monotheistic ethics. As such, it deals with two spheres of the law—the external conduct of the individual as it manifests itself in social situations, and the moral values outside of the law which inhere in the subjective intentions of the individual.

It is true that what a man *does* provides a quick guide to what he *intends*, that observable conduct is a ready index to motives. So the lawyer and the judge might argue, suggesting that the really crucial moment arrives when intention gets itself translated into conduct. Then, they will say, we can begin to deal with law by enforcing it. But not until then.

But this suggestion is inadequate for those concerned with the inner dynamics of man, not merely with the problem of society's need to enforce its law. For how can we enforce a moral value? What can be done about those immoral intentions which, for one reason or another, never more over into the realm of practice?

When the Bible deals with conduct and moral values which are breached in human practice, law is enunciated in the form of codes which regulate action. But when it goes beyond the overt act and concerns itself with the way a man thinks—"the imagination of his heart"—law emerges as moral teaching, and the teaching is imbedded in the tales and episodes which historians may read as history, or Mr. Average Man sees as good "for the youngsters" but not for him. But these Bible tales are neither; they are intended to reach down to the

The Bible Is for You

inner psyche of adult men, to speak to their unconscious mind.

Thanks to the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, we have come to understand that true guilt lies in the intention—in the unconscious intention—and that actual crime is not the cause of guilt feeling, rather, it is the *result* of guilt, guilt that belongs to intention. It is precisely in this area that the Bible has something to teach—how to sublimate and refine inner intention by exposure to the law, but not the law of the code; rather, the law as it is prismatically reflected in the ethical suggestions which lie deep below the surface of the narrative.

This is precisely why so much of Scripture, like Shaw's definition of youth, is "wasted" on young people. The tales of the Bible are tales indeed, but they are tales for adults. As long as we persist in pursuing the two extreme directions noted—oversimplifying the tales, making them palatable for young children only; or, overcomplicating the text by twisting it to fit historical or theological judgments—we shall be missing the essential moral teaching. Erich Fromm has labeled the language of symbols and dreams man's "forgotten language." Similarly, if we are to recapture the power and the immediacy of the Bible's message, we must seek to recover *its* forgotten language—the ethical truths expressed in story and myth.

Scripture, then, has many empty spaces, left empty by the Biblical narrator for much the same reason that the artist stimulates our imagination by forcing us to seek his meaning, and, in the process deepens our own insights into life, beauty, evil and truth. The Hebrew storyteller differed from the Greek: "Homer leaves no gap to fill, no wide bridges to span.

The Moral Punch Line

We know every stage of his journeys; every thought in the minds of his people; every emotion felt by them with all its outward and visible signs.”¹ The bare, unfurnished rooms of Hebrew Scripture, on the other hand, were intended by the author for the reader or listener to furnish and complete, for, unlike the Greek, the Bible does not deal solely with the immediate objects described, but rather with the hidden, suggestive, ethical implications of the scenes depicted and the tales narrated. Unlike any other literature, the Bible was left unfinished, incomplete, abounding in pliable, ethical nuances, freighted with challenging and imaginative moral question marks.

For modern adults to find meaning in the Bible, they must learn to find the keys to this forgotten language by seeking to read between the lines of Scripture, to discover the double meaning—what the text *intends* to say about man’s *intentions*.

To return to our college graduates. Had they read the stories of Rebecca and Jacob, Joseph and Jonah as adults, what might they have learned—learned in a vivid and unforgettable way? Their stories are good examples of the way the Bible leads the listener or reader to a search for intended meanings—by the power of suggestion contained in the last line of the narrative, the moral punch line, toward which the whole account inexorably moves. For, if these same stories were told without this artistic denouement put in just the same place or emphasized at just the same time, it would lead to different conclusions, and produce other than the desired effect.

¹ Mary Ellen Chase, *Life and Language in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1955), p. 114.

The Bible Is for You

The answers to those pivotal questions we addressed to our college friends can be found when we read the Bible in the way intended. Let us turn to the stories themselves.

The tale of Rebecca and Jacob serves as a classical example of the use of a punch line which is never spoken to produce an ethical effect from silence. The tale of a mother, father and two siblings is spun out, without obvious moralizing, without the pointing of admonishing fingers. But its silent, mocking ending speaks eloquently to those who can hear the echoes of the afterthought. There are four characters in the plot: aging Isaac, about to die and eager to give his paternal blessing, Esau, older of the twin brothers, man of the field, who has once disposed of his birthright in favor of a "mess of pottage," but who now comes seeking his father's blessing nevertheless; Jacob, the quiet innocent, upon mother's goading wants the blessing, too; and, finally, Rebecca, who has been neatly dubbed the "manager" by Maurice Samuel, scheming behind the scenes, seeking to arrange a situation wherein her almost-blind husband, and her not-too-bright son, Esau, would never realize that she had successfully plotted to get the blessing for her favorite, Jacob.

The plot unfolds like a cloak-and-dagger mystery. The four people are never together at one time. First, Esau appears at his father's request, and the two talk. Isaac asks him to go out to the field and bring him something good to eat, and, upon his return, he promises to give him his rightful blessing. Suddenly, the scene shifts—behind the curtain. Rebecca has been eavesdropping. She tells Jacob what she has overheard, plots with him to deceive the old man. In the next scene we find Jacob confronting Isaac, full of guile, suggesting by deception that he, indeed, is Esau. The great deception takes

The Moral Punch Line

place, just as Rebecca and Jacob had plotted. Isaac grants Jacob the blessing supposedly intended for Esau. Then, at the right moment, after Jacob leaves his father, Esau returns, eagerly awaiting the benediction. Now, the great deception is uncovered. Rebecca is distraught, but calmly plots again. She sends her beloved Jacob away, to escape the wrath of his brother, for a short sojourn with her brother Laban in the land of Haran. As soon as Esau forgets his anger, she suggests, her favorite one will come back to her, blessing and all.

The real point of the story emerges only in the silence that follows. Jacob was sent away in the hope that he would return quickly. For Rebecca wanted him so much to be with her, now that Isaac was about to die. He would take the place of her husband, be a comfort to her in her old age. Jacob does return, but not in a few days. When he does return, he never sees his mother again. Rebecca has failed because she had succeeded. One pictures Rebecca, pinning away, day after day, waiting expectantly for the return of her son. Any day now, she must have said, and he will be with me again. And in her torment could she not have asked herself the question which the Bible does not ask, but which is the crucial point: "Why did I scheme to wrest a blessing, which for me has turned out to be a curse? Had I not done what I should not have done, I would have my Jacob with me now!" She had become the butt of her own bitter joke. Isaac was gone, Esau had left, and Jacob was faraway. She remained alone, bereft of love and friendship—all because she acted in the belief that the ends justify the means.

And what of Jacob? Again, a silent punch line, emerging from the events which follow. No moralizing, only a reporting of events, which, if read properly, reach out to the depths

The Bible Is for You

of the idea that wants to be conveyed. What children or other naive readers may see as mere depiction of events, the sensitive adult will understand more profoundly. Here, in the Bible's own words, is the judgment which befalls Rebecca's accomplice:

Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel . . . And Jacob loved Rachel, and he said: "I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter." And Laban said: "It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man;" . . . And Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her. And Jacob said unto Laban: "Give me my wife for my days are fulfilled, . . ." ²

Laban, however, had other plans. Jacob had Rachel in mind but Laban was scheming to marry off Leah. One dark night the deceptive match was made. Only in the morning light did it dawn on Jacob that his bride was not his beloved Rachel, but her older sister, Leah.

The tense drama is continued in these lean and laconic lines:

And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her . . . And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah; and he said to Laban: "What is this thou hast done unto me? Did not I serve with thee for Rachel? Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?" And Laban said: "It is not so done *in our place* [*italics mine*], to give the younger before the first-born." ³

² See Gen. 29 16-21.

³ See Gen. *passim*, 29 22-30.

The Moral Punch Line

Look here, the Bible says with unspoken scorn—first, the blessing goes to the older child, and then to the next in line. Apparently you still have not learned your lesson!

Jacob must accept the decision. Leah remains with him, bears him children, but his heart is with Rachel. He must labor for Laban seven years longer for the hand of his beloved. Even then, when she finally takes her place at Leah's side as Jacob's "favorite wife," the narrator has not finished his story. Rachel bears Joseph, but in giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, she dies. The symbol of Jacob's ardent love is lost. Leah lives, but Rachel is dead!

Alas, the tragedy of Rebecca's life is also the tragedy of Jacob's. Ignobly, we may not pursue even a noble end, for in life we must expect measure for measure. Without sermonizing, artlessly and naturally, the tales move swiftly to their end, but underneath the surface the text has touched our deepest feelings, and even if in whispers it has spoken mightily to our *inner* selves.

The saga of Joseph represents a different use of the punch-line technique. Here there is a moral symphony, where the theme and its variations, as in life itself, are unknown even to the hero, until the very end of the story. Then he utters, the "punch-line" which, like a silver cord, binds the narrative together by underscoring the basic ethical dilemma which he suddenly realizes has confronted him throughout his life. Without the punch line, the whole story falls flat; with it, it becomes more than a story, it is moral teaching—law spun out as narrative.

Through his earlier years, Joseph had been an unlovely creature. He was an imp as a child, a devil as a youth and a vengeful adult. He loved power, often used it recklessly, and

The Bible Is for You

savored to the last drop the torment of his antagonists. True, his brothers taunted him as child, but from what we know of Joseph as his life unfolds we can truly sympathize with them. But the not-so-apparent purpose of the saga is not to confront the reader with what Joseph *was*; the Bible is more interested in showing us what he was capable of *becoming*. We may assume that when Joseph was cast into the pit by his brothers⁴ the young and audacious Joseph began to move toward moral adulthood. Here, as in the Abraham-Isaac episode, the crisis has come and, once Joseph is cast into the pit, the text is silent. How he felt and what he thought are not told. This silence is characteristic of the Biblical moment of crisis, and points to the inner torment which must have seized Joseph at this hour. In the silent hours, Joseph begins to grow up!

The story now rapidly moves to its climax. Here is the focal setting: Joseph is now viceroy of all Egypt. He has had his innings with his brothers, has virtually frightened them to death. The family has been reunited in Egypt and Joseph settles down to play the condescending role of a patronizing big brother. But now Jacob, the father, dies, he is no longer about to play on the sentimentality of Joseph, and again his brothers fear the worst. What will Joseph do to them now? And so, desiring to stave off any possible vindictiveness, they come before him pleadingly and offer themselves as his bondsmen. They remind him that, before their father had died, he bade them tell Joseph to forgive their transgressions against *him*!

Joseph weighs his approach. What will he tell them now? What more can he demand of them to satisfy that seemingly unsatiated ego of his? We wait for his answer. But the line which comes is not the one we have expected; Joseph has sud-

⁴ Gen. 37.24.

The Moral Punch Line

denly grown up! "Fear not," he now tells them, and then he asks: "For am I God?" This is the unexpected moral punch line. All his life he had been playing god. His childish dreams, his taunts, barbs and thrusts had revealed him as power mad. Now he was the viceroy, and at last secure. Joseph thinks: A slave who becomes a viceroy no longer need play at being God. Only the insecure, immature man wants to be more than a man must be. "For am I God?" When Joseph was able to ask this question, he revealed his maturity, for all through the years this was the one question he could not ask himself. To ask it would mean to reveal himself to himself as an insecure, vengeful person; this, insecure, vengeful persons are incapable of doing. For to ask the question is to answer it, and this is not the answer they seek. When, at the very climax of the epic story of his life, he asks the question which had gone begging, the whole purpose of the Biblical narrative is laid bare. All that he had done, everything he had thought, his deepest intentions, were always geared to the unasked question "Am I God?" The moment he asks the question, he is liberated from himself, secure, therefore friendly, compassionate, and, for the first time in his life, capable of being a brother.

Just as it would be a sad waste to have missed the vital punch line of the Joseph stories, for the whole narrative is illuminated by it, so would we elude the sensitive, perceptive teaching of the Book of Jonah if we pass over the moral irony which punctuates the very last words of the story.

The Book of Jonah, as Erich Fromm has imaginatively indicated, is a myth dealing with the problem of loneliness and the reasons for it. Jonah is a man without love. He has heard the voice of God telling him to go to Nineveh to warn the

The Bible Is for You

inhabitants that, unless they give up their evil ways, they will be destroyed. But Jonah is an unwilling prophet; he seeks to run away from the divine command. His is a religion of justice untempered by mercy. If Nineveh has sinned, then it must be destroyed; why permit it to repent of its evil ways? But God seeks to teach him the meaning of love.

Jonah cannot stand up to this teaching. He seeks to flee, to isolate himself, and so allows himself to be thrown into the sea to be swallowed by a big fish. In the belly of the fish he achieves what he wants: total protection and isolation from the demands of mature life. But the belly walls are only artificial; he must eventually return to the realities of life. "And the Lord spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land."

When he returns to reality, he is asked, once again, to proclaim God's admonition to the people of Nineveh. And the people of Nineveh hearken unto the Lord, they repent of their evil. "And God repented of the evil which He said He would do unto them; and He did it not." This is more than Jonah can stand. He is angry, hurt and filled with anxieties for having been required to face the slings of outrageous fortune hurled by reality. Jonah pleads with God: "Take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live." He goes out of the city, makes a booth and disconsolately waits to see what will happen to Nineveh. The sun is so hot that the "Lord prepared a gourd, and made it . . . be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his evil." Jonah is exceedingly glad for this protection—the gourd isolates him from his troubles. But his final test is now to come, for the Lord smites the gourd, makes it wither and causes a powerful sun to beat upon Jonah's head. With-

The Moral Punch Line

out armor against this evil, Jonah cannot bear to live: he loves no one but himself, and, without protection for his loneliness, life has no meaning.

Just as Jonah reaches the depths of his despair, the final lines of his story are told, lines which reach deeply to the fundamental purpose of the narrative:

And God said to Jonah: "Art thou greatly angry for the gourd?" And he said: "I am greatly angry, even unto death." And the Lord said: "Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night; and should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, *and also much cattle?*" ⁵ (*Italics mine.*)

"*And also much cattle!*" Here, in the very last words of Jonah's Book, comes the basic insight intended by the whole episode. What of the dumb animals, Jonah? What of the blameless, the naïve, the unsophisticated, harmless creatures? Mercy for man, compassion for your fellow human beings, these you do not possess! But the big fish and the gourd—they were your protection! These you sought, and were angered and concerned when you lost them! But if God shows *compassion* for men, it is because He also knows the meaning of *mercy* for animals—for all of His creation. The sense of mercy, the feeling of love, must permeate your whole being, extend to everyone and everything that comes into your view. Love is not a price you pay for the gift you receive; it is indivisible, and must flow freely to nourish

⁵ Jonah 4 9-11.

The Bible Is for You

everything you touch and see. Without love—full and embracing love—you must perish, for you remain alone—an unfulfilled person—divided from the world, and therefore fearful. Without love, all of creation must perish; not man alone, but “also much cattle.”

These Are the Names

WHAT'S in a name? Where Shakespeare made light of this question, the Hebrews treated it seriously. A name, as we will see, reflects an essence; it mirrors the very core of being. God's name—if one can speak of such a thing—is really His power, not a label denoting what we call Him, in contrast to the names men give other so-called deities.

But what of man's names? Are these, too, related to significant aspects of his being? Or would the inner essence of his personality go forth, like the Bard's rose, without regard to the way in which he is known? And if, in the Bible, names are significant and important, what do they say about the lives of those who bear them?

Some fourteen-hundred different names are mentioned in Scripture referring to about twenty-four hundred individuals. Of most of them we know little more than their name, and of some Biblical characters, not even their names. Yet names "speak"—they have meaning. So much meaning, in fact, that very often the Bible explicitly interprets, at the first mention

The Bible Is for You

of a new name, its significance and the reason for it. In later Biblical times, after the fifth century, the custom developed of choosing a traditional name, because of someone's being called by it formerly, rather than because of its intrinsic meaning. Even then, we should note, it was not the name of the father that was chosen for the son, but at the most that of the grandfather, if he were already dead. But in former times, this practice, known as "paponymy," was not in vogue; from Jesse, David's father, to the last king of Judah, there is a line of twenty-two generations, and no two of the monarchs' names is the same. Apparently, each man was still considered as a unique being, and the name he bore bespoke the meaning it was hoped that his life might signify.

The names of all of Jacob's sons are specifically explained perhaps because each was to be the head of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Reuben, the first-born of Leah, is so called because his mother said: "The Lord hath looked upon my affliction, for now my husband will love me."¹ Simeon was so named "because the Lord hath heard"; Levi, because "this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have borne him three sons"; Judah, because she said, "This time will I praise the Lord." And so the names and their meanings continue, for each of the remaining children.

In most Biblical instances, it was the mother who named her child. Eve named Cain; Hagar named Ishmael; Leah named her six sons and her daughter Dinah; Rachel named Joseph and Benjamin; the mother of Samson named him; so with Samuel's mother; Bathsheba, David's wife, selected Solomon's name, and, in keeping with Isaiah's prophecy, it is the mother who will name her child Immanuel. While Biblical

¹ Gen. 29, 30

These Are the Names

society is often assumed to be patriarchal, when it came to the naming of children the role of the mother was vital. She who brings forth a life from her womb, who suckles it and protects it in its most tender years, has a profound share in the development of its personality—therefore she names the child. The father may indeed, have been the legal head of the Biblical household. But the authority given to mothers to name their children reflects the significance of life's extra-legal realities and symbolizes the place of the spirit in the shaping of human destiny. In matters touching upon spiritual growth—which is the essence of personality and which a name signifies—the woman obviously played a most vital role.

More than half of the Biblical names which have survived are classed as "theophoric" names. In these, an attempt is made to identify the person with God by linking him to one of the popular names by which God is known—*El* or *Yah*. These names often consist of two parts, and either the first or the second may contain the name of deity. Thus, *Obadiah* means "the servant of the Lord"; *Isaiah*, the "salvation," or "victory of the Lord"; *Nathaniel*, "the gift of the Lord"; *Ezekiel*, "the strength of the Lord." Or the divine name may be in the first part, as in *Jonathan*, *Jochebed*, *Elhanan*, *Eliezer*. Sometimes these names are shortened and the prefix or suffix eliminated. For example, *Obadiah* becomes *Obed*, *Isaiah* is made into *Jesse*, *Jonathan* is abbreviated to *Nathan*, and *Elhanan* to *Hanan*.

In addition, there are other names which ask of the Lord some quality for the bearer. *Tamar* probably means "may you be as beautiful as a palm-tree"; *Hannah*, "may you be full of grace"; *Ethan*, "may you be strong"; *Tirzah*, "may you be pleasing." In contrast, there is a group of names which were

The Bible Is for You

undoubtedly chosen to have the effect of a permanent protection from harm. The name expresses, what, it is hoped, the child will *not* be. In this category are such names as Zeruiah, which means "afflicted with skin disease"; Kelita, "a dwarf"; and Nabal, "a godless fool."

There is a category of Biblical names whose purpose is to endow the child with power to resist possible enemies in the same style as do some of the creatures of nature. So Caleb, meaning a dog, Z'ev a wolf, Nahshon a serpent, are names which suggest a defensive capacity to withstand the challenge of attack.

Finally, a large number of names in the Bible can be explained only as being the result of a special occasion or natural phenomenon which accompanied the birth of the child. Such names as Haggai, meaning "born on a festival"; Zerah, "born at sunrise"; Barak, "born at a time of lightning," are a few examples of many which comprise this category.

As a means of making a distinction between one person and another, some of whom carried the same name, in the patriarchal society of the Bible it was customary to add the name of his father to his—thus Joshua, the son of Nun; David, the son of Jesse. Sometimes, because of the son's distinction it works in reverse: Terah, father of Abraham, or Kish, father of Saul. Indeed this early Biblical usage is customary among Semitic tribes even today. It is not uncommon for Arabs to be called by the name of one's own son. "Abu"—which, in Arabic, means "father of"—is a widely used prefix and many an Abraham (Ibrahim), with a son named Jacob (Yaqub), is publicly known as Abu Yaqub—father of Jacob.

Distinguished brothers, too, lend their names: Benjamin, brother of Joseph, or Joel, the brother of Nathan. Other

These Are the Names

times, it is the place of birth, rather than his family's name which distinguishes one, and so there are such names as Uriah, the Hittite; Elijah, the Tishbite; Jesse, the Bethlehemite; Barzilai, the Gileadite; Hezrai, the Carmelite; Bani, the Gadite. Or, additionally, the special title of the function a man played in the community was appended to his given name: Eli, the priest; Nathan, the prophet; Ezra, the scribe.

In many instances, of course, the way in which these people lived and died had little resemblance to the meaning of their names. At least, their parents—mother or fathers, as the case may have been—when they gave these names to their children, believed that the name would “speak.” It is fair to suppose that many ancient parents were no more successful in projecting their hopes for their children than many moderns. In any case, there is little opportunity to track down the lives of most of these people; often, they appear only in a genealogical list, or, even if mentioned in a narrative, many have the Biblical habit of popping in suddenly, only to pop out, just as rapidly.

But there are a number of Biblical personalities whose names not only speak—they comprise a veritable story in themselves. Here we can deal with but a few of these. To see how their biographies are often caught up in a single, descriptive noun, the nominative, let us look at three Biblical men.

Adam

“Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” This is one way of understanding what the name Adam means. Adam is literally the “dust of the earth”; he is taken from the humblest of Creation, and, after a life of aspiration to the

The Bible Is for You

highest, is returned unto the ground. This is his tragedy, but it is also his triumph.

Dust of the earth—like earth itself—belongs to no man. Adam does not belong to Adam. "For the whole earth is mine"—again and again the refrain runs through Scripture: Adam is earth and he cannot keep what does not belong to him; here is his despair. But he can borrow—and this is his victory. What he "owns" is taken, as he is, from the earth. But that which is his, like he himself, may be enkindled with the spark of heaven which transforms his poor earth into the "image of God."

Dust of the earth—Adam—has no national origin, no racial pigmentation, no political ideology, no ecclesiastical organization. Adam is dust, because he is Everyman—irrespective of his land, his ethnic tie, his government or his church. Adam is God's man, not man's man, and God is silent about the very things over which we are so vocal. Dust—and nothing more, describes his origin. The universal commonalty of humble origins is the only reference we have to the stuff of which he is made. In the end, not what he is made of nor what he makes of himself is important—only, that he is made. This is why it is dust that tells the tale—for only a loving, living Creator could elevate that which is so lowly to so high an eminence, by lending earth something of Heaven.

Dust of the earth can be used to serve false ends: "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath. . . ." Adam is dust—but so are a thousand known or unknown idols, born of Adam's lust, ambition and servitude to the passing but popular fancy. Adam's idols are symbols of his earthly weakness—he plays the god, and fash-

These Are the Names

ions his creatures from the dust. But his dust is not God's dust, it is only from his own backyard, crude, localized, provincial, unmistakably *his*.

Adam is God's dust, God is not *his* symbol, he is *God's!* Adam, dust made in God's image, is the eternal symbol of Heaven *in* earth. Adam is our father, and man is called by his name; in him and in us all God has symbolized Himself, forever.

As long as Adam knows what he symbolizes, even his borrowed life, while no paradise, can lead him in the direction of the blessing.

This is his triumph.

Abraham

"But thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee."²

Like Adam, Abraham is named by God, not by man. This accounts for the universal, timeless significance of his name. While Adam is the symbol of God's uncompleted creation, Abraham represents that spiritual development of which Adam is ultimately capable. Adam is Everyman; Abraham is what Everyman ought to be.

Adam is symbol of man's propensity to reject the divine, and thus falter; Abraham, of his capacity to accept and thus aspire—to walk up the mountain. Adam decides, but in terms of the satisfactions of his own ego. The decisions of Abraham are larger. As his name declares, they embrace "the multitude of nations." In a word: Adam is the father of *man*; Abraham,

² Gen. 17:5.

The Bible Is for You

of ideal *mankind*. Father of a multitude of nations: both aspects of his name have something to say.

He is urged on by the divine word to leave *his father*, because he is destined to become the real father, the teacher. As teacher of mankind he stakes his belief in a just world governed by a just God. And his teachings are communicated in the only way in which religious teaching can be truly transmitted—by personal experience and example.

What are fundamental examples of these, as Scripture understands them? Two events, which are chronologically and geographically separate and distinct, yet religiously, reflect a single, indivisible, ethical faith.

In the first, Abraham contends with God in behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, as He is about to destroy them by reason of their violent injustice. The teacher of justice turns to the God of justice and demands: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" For the sake of the possible minority of righteous men in these cities of evil, Abraham takes up their cause before the Almighty.

But, when, after these things had come to pass, the same God of justice, "proves" Abraham by commanding that he take his only son "whom thou lovest, even Isaac" and offer him up as sacrifice, Abraham's response is silent obedience. He rose up early in the morning, went on his way to do God's bidding with dispatch. At Sodom, Abraham speaks up eloquently in defense of others—this is how he "tests" God. Now when God tests him, he must remain silent, to set the example of obedience to the divine call. The episode, of course, is a test of Abraham's fitness to serve as the father-teacher: Is he able to stand up to a moral test in his personal life? Abraham is no Adam. Adam seeks for himself, while blaming others;

These Are the Names

the father-teacher defends his neighbor. His silent suffering, while being tested is clear testimony to a profound faith that God will ultimately be proven just, if he will continue to maintain, even in the dark hours of his life, strong belief in God's final justice.

Abraham is the father-teacher of the multitude of nations, not only of those confined to the narrow shelter of family ties. It is this vastness of concern which is written into the name he bears. He stands out as the spiritual unifier of the world's grand medley of peoples—but not the creedal homogenizer. A father stakes out the ideals and beliefs by which his children will live. Hopefully, they will walk, as Isaac did, on his path with him. But Isaac is Isaac and not Abraham. Although he walks by the light of the father, he must walk for himself.

This, too, is a crucial, though still-unrecognized, lesson of the father-teacher: the multitude of nations are to be guided by his example, but, like the Biblical leopard, they cannot be expected to change their spots. They must remain separate, though united, true forever to their own collective personalities. Their way will forever be illumined by Abraham, but their way must be revered as *their* way. Abraham is the "spiritual father" of an ideal humanity. Always, however, when we think of him, we must not forget his name: father of a *multitude of nations!*

Moses

Moses was as much a political rebel as he was the spiritual savior and religious redeemer of his people. This was hardly coincidental.

The Bible Is for You

When he cried, "Let my people Go!" he sought not only their freedom to worship their God, but also to emancipate them from the toils of a political tyranny. For the faith of Egypt, as is so often the case, was intimately connected with its politics. Instinctively, in the centuries that followed, down to the time of the American revolution, other peoples have also rallied around his call to *political* liberty. Alongside of Washington, Moses is also a father of American freedom.

The Biblical interpretation of history, as we have had occasion to note, is a religious one. It therefore regards the debasement of Pharaoh, his immoral subjugation of slaves and his all-powerful dominion as both the reflection and outcome of false worship. Had Egypt known the true God, the Bible suggests, she would have also known the moral way. The imperial lust of the Pharaohs, like that of all the Caesars who have followed—from antiquity to our own day—can suffer no other religious devotion but the worship of the emperor-dictator. To worship a *spiritual* king of kings is not only a religious affront to the mortal king, more, as the history of Rome in ancient Palestine well demonstrates, it is regarded as an act of political subversion and treason.

The dry and parched land of the Pharaohs, in ancient days as in our own time, counted water as its greatest blessing. Most of its land area was uncultivable, and only the inundations of its Nile River, with its periodic overflow, made life and culture possible. Among the greatest of Egyptian deities, therefore, was the Nile itself, whose waters were the dispensers of fertility and life. Osiris, their great god, was identified with the waters, especially with the waters of the Nile. In the Pyramid Texts, we find the Egyptian ruler, Rameses IV, saying to Osiris: "Thou art indeed the Nile, great on the

These Are the Names

fields at the beginning of the seasons, gods and men live by the moisture that is in thee." ³

Ultimately, the Pharaohs deified themselves by identifying their own persons with the river. They said: "The river is mine, and I have made it." ⁴ It is no small irony, then, that the Bible centers the crucial moments of Israel's history—the birth of Moses and the Hebrews' departure at the Sea of Reeds—in Egypt in the very waters which served as Egypt's divine protection. Both the rise of Israel's salvation and its exodus are connected up with the symbol of Egypt's immoral belief. That which Egypt saw as blessing, the Bible succinctly depicts as its curse! And the name Moses remains as a living and scathing one-word editorial, an ironical commentary intended to scandalize the immoral thought and behavior of Egypt.

Etymologists are probably correct when they suggest that the name Moses is of Egyptian and not Hebraic origin; it means, in Egyptian, a "child." The Bible itself records that Moses received his name, not at the hands of his mother, but from Pharaoh's daughter. It is likely, then, that Moses, saved from the river by the princess and raised in the king's palace, became the "child" of the Pharaoh's daughter, who so named him.

But the author of the Biblical story quietly saves his tart subtlety until later; he almost hides his arrow in his quiver. "Moses," he reports, "was given this name by the princess because she said, 'I drew him out of the *water*.'" What a remarkable, ironical pun! He has the daughter of the king naming "her" child—the future redeemer of her father's slaves

³ See James H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), p. 96.

⁴ Ezek. 29 9.

The Bible Is for You

—as “the one drawn out of water.” And not this alone. Instead of calling him *Mashui*—which would have been grammatically correct—she ends up giving him the name *Moshe*! To those who are not familiar with the Hebrew, we should let you in on this “delicious” secret: *Mashui* is the passive participle and would have conformed with her description of Moses as the “one drawn out of water.” *Moshe* is the active participle of the verb, and means quite the reverse. *Moshe* is not one who *was drawn* out of water; it is he who *will draw* others out! Obviously, the author has his tongue in cheek, and has used the poor, unsuspecting Egyptian princess—who could do nothing about it, since she probably didn’t know Hebrew—as his foil.

To remove from Israel the chains of Egyptian bondage, Moses must obliterate the stain of Egyptian water. He who was himself drawn out must draw others out. Instead of becoming the “child” of the royal house, Moses—as his name clearly says—will remove all of those who were cast into Egyptian waters, and thus destroy the magical power these seem to possess. He, who could have succumbed to the majesty and ease of royal protection chose, instead, to go with his brethren and to redeem them out of the land of bondage. Bearing his name—“one who draws out”—Moses could not do otherwise.

He did not live to bring them to the promised land; he died facing it from afar. But his task had been achieved. His was not to bring Israel *to* Canaan, but to take her *out* of an immoral land. In simple, declaratory sentences the Bible describes this achievement. But to those who understand the sardonic syllables, the finale is a rousing and profound summary of the work of Moses.

These Are the Names

And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, . . . and the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, even all the host of Pharaoh that went in after them into the sea; there remained not so much as one of them. But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; . . . And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord, and in His servant Moses.⁵

Moses, as the servant of the true God, had succeeded in destroying Egypt. But most significant: because of him, her evil would be mocked for all time. She drowned in her own waters!

⁵ Exod 14:27f.

Fathers and Sons

FATHERS and sons.

The Bible uses this intimate family relation to suggest a series of lessons in life. The father-image, as we have seen, is the ideal portrait of the moral teacher. It was only later that Israel developed a stratified social structure which set aside a whole tribe to act as its professional specialists—the priests, who were heads of the cult, as well as the people's judges. In the earlier, less complicated society, it was the first-born sons who were singled out to serve in this capacity; being more intimate with their fathers, they were more likely to carry on, responsibly, the religious and moral style of life which was theirs.

In spite of its urgent desire to endow the father-son relationship with weighty moral significance, the Bible does not, however, shut its eyes to the difficulties, even the tragedies, which inhere in the situation. There are fathers who succeed with others, but fail their own children; fathers who reach heights, whose children, however, subvert their memory and

Fathers and Sons

obliterate, rather than exalt the meaning of their lost lives; fathers whose greatness is matched by their offspring, but who never live to see it. The ideal, of course, is the image conveyed by the greatest father-teacher of them all: Abraham. His position as the moral parent of ideal humanity is tested and confirmed by his achievement with his own son, Isaac. This personal success is summed up in the vivid Biblical picture: "And they went both of them together."

Not all Biblical fathers, however, fare so well. There is Eli, the priest, leader of his people, but incapable of influencing his own children. Perhaps this is the inherent meaning of the story of his displacement by Samuel. The latter is the child for whom his mother Hannah has prayed, and, in gratitude for the gift of his life, she lends him to the Lord—"as long as he liveth he is lent to the Lord."¹

This is a stinging rebuke to the incumbent leader, Eli the priest! Samuel lives in the presence of the Lord because his mother—and presumably his father, too—has led him to the service of the divine by personal example. But Eli's sons act abominably and immorally. Apparently preoccupied with his communal tasks, he does precious little to prevent their vile behavior, and fails to serve as a personal influence in their lives. But, in losing his own children, he has lost the claim for leadership. God explains the reason: "For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity, *in that he knew* that his sons did bring a curse upon themselves, *and he rebuked them not.*"² (Italics mine.)

There is tragedy enough in the life of a parent whose children do not live up to his promise *after* he has passed on, but

¹ I Sam 1 28.

² I Sam 3. 13.

The Bible Is for You

not so great as the humiliation which must come when, in his own lifetime, children follow after strange and immoral ways. Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons, die, and the announcement of their passing brings on the father's death—"he fell from off his seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck broke, and he died." But the subtle, unanswered question remains: Did Eli die because of his sons' passing, or was he, in effect, the real cause of their death—"in that . . . he knew . . . and he rebuked them not?"

A different, but no less tragic, aura surrounds the life of Gideon (known, too, as Jerubbaal) and his sons. The Midianites were harassing his people; his own father had built an altar to the Canaanite god, Baal, and all of Israel was in the throes of idolatry. Gideon succeeds his own father, destroys his spurious altar and succeeds in rallying about him thousands of his people who are prepared to follow him in battle against the idolatrous enemy. But Gideon will not win over the idol-worshippers by dint of sheer numbers alone; this would be a material, not a spiritual, victory. Of the ten thousand who volunteer, he will take only three hundred—the others fail his "religious" test. Those who kneel on their knees to drink water from the spring have revealed their spiritual weakness: they had not yet lost their habit of bowing down before the idols. With great skill and courage, the three hundred frighten the hosts of the Midianites, rid the land of its idolatrous oppressors and re-establish the worship of the one God. And all this, done by a handful of spirited believers whose small numbers are the very symbol of the magnitude of the victory.

Midian was subdued by Gideon—but the spirit of Midian was to survive and obliterate his deeds, the work of his very own children. As soon as Gideon was dead, the children of

Fathers and Sons

Israel made Baal their god once again. His children, who numbered seventy, far from defending "all the goodness which he had shown unto Israel," seem to be in the vanguard of those who would defect from his teachings and works. Nor is the fact that he had so many of them merely an accidental or insignificant side of the tragedy. It is at the heart of its powerful moral irony!

Gideon, in uprooting evil, would not rely upon numbers; the fewer the battlers, the more ardent their belief and the greater their zeal. He dies, and no sooner is he gone than his own sons—so many in number—cannot uphold his victory. Abimelech, one of their number, wrests the rule from their hands, then destroys them, slaying them together on one stone. Only the youngest son, Jotham, remains. The reader might expect, at this point, to find Jotham making a valiant effort to defend his father's purpose—perhaps this is why a single son was saved. Perhaps, we are entitled to imagine, this is the point of the story: Gideon saved Israel with a minority; Jotham, too, following in his father's way, can redeem his memory singlehandedly. For a few scintillating moments our hopes for Gideon almost catch fire, as Jotham ascends Mount Gerizim in Shechem, center of the Baal worship, and begins his biting and pointed parable. He moves us mightily as he says:

The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive-tree: Reign thou over us. But the olive-tree said unto them: Should I leave my fatness, seeing that by me they honor God and man, and go to hold sway over the trees? And the trees said to the fig-tree: Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig-tree said unto them: Should I leave my sweetness, and my good fruitage, and go to hold sway over the

The Bible Is for You

trees³ And the trees said unto the vine: Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them: Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to hold sway over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble: Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees: If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shadow; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon. Now therefore, if ye have dealt truly and uprightly in that ye have made Abimelech king, and if ye have dealt well with Jerubbaal [Gideon] and his house, and have done unto him according to the deserving of his hands—for *my father fought for you, and adventured his life, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian; and ye have risen up against my father's house this day*. . . . If ye then have dealt truly with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and Beth-millo; . . . and devour Abimelech.³ (Italics mine.)

Nobly and courageously spoken, Jotham, the noble and courageous son of a noble and courageous father! We are prepared to clap our hands at this victory, the vindication of a great father's memory by the youngest surviving son. But no sooner do we poise ourselves to applaud than Jotham slips away from sight. He will be back—he must be back—we insistently, instinctively believe. But the story ends on a simple, yet profoundly tragic, note—the failure of nerve: “And Jotham ran away, and fled, and went to Beer, and dwelt there, for fear of Abimelech his brother.”

No, Jotham is no Isaac after all. He knew very well what he had *to do*, but all he *could do* was to mouth the words.

³ Judg. 9:8-21.

Fathers and Sons

Gideon's work was ultimately destroyed by the son who *knew* his duty—his father had duly taught him—but who was unable to *perform* it. There are times, the Bible reminds us, when fathers teach, but sons fail them.

Not all sons fail their fathers in their lifetime, like Hophni and Phinehas. Nor do all subvert their memory, like Abimelech *and* Jotham. Rarely do fathers live to see blessing in their children, because this would require them to be ideal as was Abraham. However, there are some parents, the Bible would have us know, who, though short of perfection, do leave an indelible mark upon their offspring; thus their unfulfilled hopes are realized by those who follow. It is in the lives of David and Solomon that these lessons emerge.

No son can be a carbon copy of his father. The Bible does not point toward such an unrealistic, even irreligious, filial archetype—irreligious, by the way, because each man must strive to become a full person *on his own*. Scripture expects that children will walk in the way of parents on the road that leads to God; but each generation, like each man, meets God separately and distinctly. Abraham's God is known to him as a "shield," Isaac's as his "fear." Moses, at the Sea of Reeds, sings his song, to "his" God, as well as to the God of his ancestors: "This is *my God*, and I will glorify Him; My *father's God*, and I will exalt him."⁴ One God, but different sets of human eyes, different hearts and minds.

The Hassidic teaching of Rabbi Zusya provides a revealing clue to the Biblical view. Before his death, it is said, Rabbi Zusya wept: "In the world to be, God will ply me with questions. He will not ask me: 'Why were you not as Moses?' because I am not Moses. He will not ask me: 'Why were you

⁴Exod 15:2.

The Bible Is for You

not as Isaiah?' because I am not Isaiah." His disciples listened with amazement and could not understand. "Why, then, do you weep?" they asked. The rabbi sighed as he answered: "I weep because God will ask me: 'Why were you not *Zusya*?' And what shall I answer?"

Perhaps so few fathers, then, live to see the blessing in the lives of their children because the real blessing lies beyond them. Even among the three patriarchs—themselves very special individuals—it was only the most unique of all, Abraham, who could know a total life-experience. Isaac died before Jacob returned home and Jacob passed away in the exile of Egypt, with his children and children's children on the eve of bondage. The best most fathers can hope for is to establish preconditions for the blessing in their own lifetime, which may be fulfilled in the lifetimes of their children. Here, David's career serves as a normative example.

David—as his name suggests—is the Bible's darling, but he was no saint. He was part piety, part passion, probably in equal quantities. Few other Biblical heroes figure so prominently—qualitatively and quantitatively—in the Scriptural accounts. He is colorful, self-assertive and full of daring from the start. Soon after we are introduced to him he quickly runs away with our hearts as he strikes a gallant pose opposite the mighty Goliath. The more Saul eyes him in mad jealousy, the closer we draw to him. When he flees the king's wrath, we follow along, to be sure that he will return unharmed. And when he does return and proves his loyalty to the suspicious, psychotic ruler, we sigh heavily with relief. Saul promises him the kingdom, and we silently rejoice that our boy has finally been recognized, and anxiously await his ascent to the throne.

Fathers and Sons

Only the wise statesmanship of David can bring some measure of peace to the ever-smoldering controversies between the northern and southern tribes of the kingdom. Not long after he becomes king, he acquires the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites, and makes of this political no-man's land a kind of Biblical District of Columbia. Safely settled in a new capital city, which is neither the north's nor the south's, he begins to build up his kingdom, uprooting the ever-threatening Philistines. Now he reigns over a united country—from Dan, in the north, to Beersheba, in the south.

David's life history appeals to us as an ancient Horatio Alger—up from the rags of the shepherd to the riches of the king—and it possesses all of the hallmarks of a magnificent success story. But somehow, despite his aberrations—not the least of which was his scheming to get rid of Uriah the Hittite, that he might take his wife, Bathsheba, for himself—his winsome ways and thorough earthiness help to dispel any anger we might feel toward him. We feel sorry for him when he errs; we can never hate him. When he has done wrong, he is able to listen to the excoriating words of the prophet Nathan, and, in sincere, humble and unpretentious words, say: "I have sinned against the Lord." And when Nathan responds mercifully, saying, "the Lord also hath put away thy sin," we sense that our judgment has been right all along: God, too, sees that his greatness far overshadows his waywardness.

It is, perhaps, just this realistic portrait that continues to emerge before us which endears David to us all the more. He is a flesh-and-blood king, a three-dimensional man, not a wooden, half-real, fictional character. Most of all, we know very well his devotion to his people and to their way of life, and how in moments of sheer religious ecstasy, when the ark

The Bible Is for You

of the Lord was finally brought into "his" city, he became as one of them, "leaping and dancing before the Lord." This is a spontaneous, vivacious, ecstatic and essentially religious man. Little wonder, then, that tradition has bestowed upon him the title: "Psalmist, the sweet singer of Israel."

But like other flesh-and-blood men, his best-laid plans go awry. It was "in his heart" to build a house for the name of the Lord, nevertheless he could not build that house. This, the crowning glory to all of his other achievements, was denied him. Here we are reminded of that other manly and courageous leader, Moses, and how he, too, could not touch foot upon the land of promise.

But David had a son, a son called Solomon. Solomon was quite other than David, but he built David's house unto the Lord because he walked before God as his father had walked; *he* confirmed the covenant of David's life. Because of him it was not to be breached, but fulfilled.⁵

Which explains how it was that generation after generation, Bible students could read the thirtieth Psalm, knowing fully well that David was not alive at the time Solomon's Temple was dedicated. The Psalm begins. "A Psalm; a Song at the Dedication of the House; of David." When they read this, they must have smiled inside, knowingly. No, David was not physically present when Solomon dedicated the House of the Lord, *but he was there!* The dedication song was "of David" because Solomon, his son, remembered and did not forget. Solomon built the House because it had been "in David's heart."

There are some fathers, the Bible brilliantly reminds us, whose hearts still beat in the hearts of their children.

⁵ II Chron. 7 17-18.

Brothers

THE very first brothers, Cain and Abel, did not live happily together. Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Adonijah and his fraternal rivals—all had long and difficult moments with one another. Repeatedly, we are reminded that men come into conflict with that which they should love. Instead of exalting one another, they sometimes destroy each other.

Conflict, it seems, is written into the very laws of life and nature. The very act of birth consists of a struggle to survive, and from that first moment of breath we continue to face a “booming and buzzing confusion” which relentlessly weighs down upon us. The conflicts of man spread over three vast areas of his experience.

There is, first, man’s difficulty with Nature. Perhaps because of the divine imperative to gain “dominion” over the world of nature, he is inevitably locked in conflict with that world. (To rule over something necessarily requires a clash of power.) Thus, in spite of the inordinate endowments with

The Bible Is for You

which he has been equipped to help him accomplish this divine purpose, he is often defeated. He thinks, dreams, fashions and designs. Nature, nevertheless, often overwhelms him. In spite of his mental and spiritual capacities, he is but an atomistic speck in a far-flung universe he did not create. The human frustration which follows in the wake of this knowledge is universally known and experienced. From Job's days to our own we sense our creaturely inadequacy; we, too, hear the haunting questions:

Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days began,
And caused the dayspring to know its place, . . .
Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? . . .
Hast thou surveyed unto the breadths of the earth?
Declare, if thou knowest it all. . . .
Out of whose womb came the ice?
And the hoar-frost of heaven,
Who hath gendered it? . . .
Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds,
That abundance of waters may cover thee?
Canst thou send forth lightnings, that they may go,
And say unto thee: "Here we are"?
Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts?
Or who hath given understanding to the mind? ¹

The ultimate human wisdom, of course, teaches us to succumb to Nature, when we must—this is part of our victory. The wise man learns to live *with* Nature, harnessing her to life. The battle is won, not by fighting her laws, but by co-operating with them, understanding them.

Man also comes upon conflict, as the Bible repeatedly drama-

¹ Job 38 *passim* 12-36.

Brothers

tizes, when he attempts to fight the divine laws of *human* nature. We have been no more successful in controlling human nature than we have been able to live at peace with the world of physical nature. History is testimony to man's apparent inability to live with his brothers. And the Bible carefully records this stark fact, refusing to gloss over it. It records these hateful, human episodes because it wants to say something to us about them. What it has to say helps to answer our agonizing questions. Why do brothers kill one another? Why do we fight and deal treacherously "every man against his neighbor?" Why have some wise men learned to make peace with Nature by living with her laws, but have not yet succeeded in learning how to win peace among men?

The essence of the Biblical answer is caught up in the basic truth: I fight my brother because I fight myself. There—in the battleground of our own interior—lies the field of man's greatest conflict: Man against himself!

It is this knowledge which the Bible pungently conveys in the familiar story of Jacob's reunion with Esau. At the ford of Jabbok, on the eve of meeting with his estranged brother after a long absence, Jacob engages in a struggle. Before darkness had fallen, the frightened Jacob made jittery preparations for the fateful meeting. He is a nervous general on the eve of battle: his wives, concubines and eleven children he causes to pass over the waters of the ford; to each he hands a gift, hoping, perhaps, to appease the "enemy" and thus avoid an outright battle. Then, after these strategic preparations, he himself remains alone on this side of the water—alone with his fears, in the black of the night.

Then, suddenly, from nowhere, an apparition, in the form of a man, appears, and wrestles with him throughout the night.

The Bible Is for You

As day breaks, Jacob bests his opponent, who pleads with him to let him go. Whereupon Jacob says: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." And he said unto him: "What is thy name?" And he said: "Jacob." And he said: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed." And Jacob asked him, and said: "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name." And he said: "Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?" And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "for I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved." And the sun rose upon him as he passed over Peniel, and he limped upon his thigh."²

This picture of an apparition which "attacked" him, it seems clear, is nothing less than the Bible's way of describing mythically the encounter of the human with the divine. The nightlong conflict is a spiritual struggle ending in catharsis: Jacob meets his God, and wins over his fears and aggressions by meeting his lesser self in the powerful presence of the divine. Jacob struggles until the light dawns and the darkness is over—and with the breaking of day, the fears of the night have fled. He wins. But when and how does he win?

The moment of victory is not to be found in his subduing of the apparition; it arrives only in what seems, but, of course, is not, the anticlimax. It is the asking for, and the bestowing of, the blessing, which constitutes the victory over darkness and fear. Had he not sought the blessing—indeed, he virtually demanded it—he could never have achieved it. The blessing comes to those who go forth to meet it, and, who, by means of hard and persistent struggle, persevere until the dawn

² Gen. 32 27-33.

Brothers

comes up to obliterate the night. And what is the blessing? A change of name—which is nothing less than a change of essence, of central purpose and of spiritual personality. Indeed, this is the crucial significance of Jacob's struggle: he was *transformed as a man*, when he truly and fully confronted his God, with his body as with his spirit. And that transformation supplies the core lesson of this story of divine-human encounter: we are victorious in conflicts with nature and with our brothers only when we are capable of conquering ourselves.

But how does one conquer himself? This is precisely the question that his new name answers: Israel is he who must continuously struggle to meet God and his fellow man in those encounters which teach him how to prevail *over himself*. When a man meets God he comes to see his fellow man for what he is—a brother—because, in the struggle to capture a glimpse of the divine, a man must first subdue himself. God, when we go forth to meet Him, helps us to reduce our own *self*—our passionate egos, our voracious vanities, our ambitious aggressions—and thus, accepting ourselves as capable of purer motives, we come to see our neighbors, for the first time perhaps, as nothing less than ourselves. This is what makes a neighbor a brother, and this is why Scripture taught: "Love thy neighbor; he is as thee!"³

That this lesson in the meaning of the divine-human encounter is what this story intends to teach is clear from what follows. On the morrow, when he meets Esau, who runs to embrace and kiss him, Jacob no longer fears what his brother might do to him, for his confidence in Esau has been restored.

³ Lev. 19 18. This is usually mistranslated as: "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

The Bible Is for You

By transforming his distrust of Esau into brotherliness, he had subdued his own fright, gained inner trust and learned how to prevail over himself—his life “is preserved.” “I have seen thy face,” Jacob is now able to tell Esau, “as one seeth the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me.” The face of a man turns out to be a pleasing, brotherly face when it is first seen in the light of God. When Jacob had seen God, the Father, Esau truly became his brother.

One final point still remains. Why does the story conclude with what appears to be an unimportant footnote, “and he limped upon his thigh”? What strange irony—Israel, the victor, wounded! The story’s last words should not go unnoticed, for they round out the total picture we have been attempting to portray.

In the original Hebrew, *Yisrael*—Israel, is rendered in a grammatical form of the verb which suggests habitual, continuing action: *Yisrael*—he who *continues to struggle*, to encounter God. Let no one, therefore, imagine that one solitary incident, one moment of divine self-disclosure, one fleeting glimpse of God, or one powerful, moving or ecstatic religious experience, can carry a man a whole life through. Life, as Buber reminds us, too, is lived on “the narrow ridge” in the midst of “holy *insecurity*!” Israel is the limping struggler, victorious in this incident, but forever reminded of his weakness, his mortal creatureliness. Of his encounter with God, what remains is not a badge of salvation but a mark of incompleteness. He will limp always, for he must never assume that he has finally and ultimately found God. The limp will recall to him that he must struggle, again and again, to meet Him, wherever He can be found.

This view of God and man is typically that of the Hebrew

Bible. From the very beginning, it was the *beginning*, the process of *renewal* which the Bible emphasized. Men, in their naiveté, imagine that a God can be grasped, clutched and even worshiped like a thing. Once in possession of the secret, they imagine, they can conjure the god, literally "force" it to do their bidding. Jacob, too, believed that, at first. This is why he demanded of the apparition: "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name!" But, in reply, he is only admonished for asking. He is taught: *It is not the name, but the blessing that is important.* ("And he said: 'Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?' And he blessed him there.") Not what God is, but what God does, this is the essence of faith. The converse—preoccupation with what God *is*, indifference to what God *does*—is theology, not faith. The Bible, clearly, is not a book of theology!

This very idea is repeated in classical form, as part of the episode of God's disclosure to Moses. There, again, the teaching is driven home, in almost ironical style. God's name—what God *is*—is not what men must seek, for, if this were the sum of the religious quest, men would forever after sit back smugly and self-righteously once they had "captured" and possessed God. Man must *continue to struggle—Yisrael—to find and meet Him.*

Moses, charged with the challenge of speaking to the children of Israel and leading them from servitude to freedom, knows however, the spirit of idolatry which still lays hold of their hearts. Thus he asks God: "Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them: the God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me: What is His name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses: 'I AM THAT I AM'; and He said: 'Thus shalt

The Bible Is for You

thou say unto the children of Israel: I AM hath sent me unto you.' ”⁴

Erich Fromm has suggested a fundamentally sound and incisive interpretation of this intriguing exchange. “The meaning of these words,” he writes, “becomes even clearer if we pay closer attention to the Hebrew text. ‘I am that I am (*ehye asher ehye*)’ would be translated more correctly in the tense used in the original: ‘I am being that I am being.’ ” Moses asks God for a name because a name is something one can grasp and worship. God throughout the whole story of Exodus has made loving concessions to the idolatrous state of mind of the children of Israel, and so he also makes the concession of telling Moses his name. But there is profound irony in this name. It expresses the process of being rather than something finite that could be named like a thing. The meaning of the text would be accurately rendered if it were translated “My name is NAMELESS.”⁵

When man can name a thing he can possess it, even dominate it. This is why Adam was granted the power to give “names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field.” For man was charged with “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth. . . .” But man cannot know the name of God—He is nameless—else he will mistakenly believe that he can control Him at will, or, that, once known, God is forever possessed.

This is why it is so difficult to remain a brother, even after we have been one, for, unless we continue to struggle to meet

⁴Exod 3:13-14.

⁵Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1940), p. 116

Brothers

the Father, as a lifelong adventure, the faces of our brothers are clouded over in the shadows of smug forgetfulness. The conflict of man and his brothers continues to reflect his ongoing battle against himself.

All of us limp as we tread "the narrow ridge" of life. A reminder: the supreme effort goes on; the struggle to meet God, find ourselves, and hence our brothers, continues forever.

The Failure of Success

WORLD history," says Buber, "is the history of successes; the heroes who have not succeeded but who cannot be excluded from it on account of their conspicuous heroism serve only as a foil, as it were. . . . [History] murmurs a low dirge over the overpowered heroes, but its paean . . . for those who are crowned with success, rings out loud.

"The Bible knows nothing of this intrinsic value of success. On the contrary, when it announces a successful deed, it is duty-bound to announce in complete detail the failure involved in the success."¹

One of Scripture's most potent instruments is its use of irony in reviewing the events of past history and the exploits of its heroes. It renders these tales in straight-faced, unemo-

¹ Reprinted from *Israel and the World* by Martin Buber by permission of Schocken Books, Inc., New York, copyright 1948 by Schocken Books Inc., pp. 124-25.

The Failure of Success

tional rhetoric—but behind the dispassionate depictions, there is biting sarcasm. Yet so adroit is its skill that the unwary reader can often miss the poignancy of its implied criticism. The Bible is often at its sharpest when the cutting edge of its comment on times and men has consciously been blunted. What emerges, however, is a keen appraisal of human nature—the recurring yet almost overlooked truth—the failure of success.

We consider first the ironical way in which Scripture describes the emancipation of Israel from Egypt. Instead of glossing over the people's backsliding in the wake of the exodus, or even censoring stories which show them in a poor light, the narrator seems to go out of his way to highlight them. He wants us to know that success is often failure. And not only in the life of a single individual, but sometimes for a whole people.

But why concentrate upon the failure of a whole people?

Until the exodus, the one God of Scripture was principally known by single individuals—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron. What made the departure from Egypt so significant was not merely the liberty it conferred upon erstwhile bondsmen, but the crucial fact that it represented a monumental religious milestone. Now an entire people had accepted the one God of history as *their* God, and thus paved the way for His ultimate acknowledgement by all peoples. This is what makes the Song of Moses at the sea so significant: it was not only Moses who sang unto the Lord, but as Scripture happily reports, it is Moses "*and the children of Israel*" (italics mine) who exclaim: "I will sing unto the Lord, for He is highly exalted; The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, And He is become my

The Bible Is for You

salvation. This is my God, and I will glorify Him, My father's God, and I will exalt Him." ² He is not Moses' God alone, but now the people's. Yet no sooner do the people cross over into the dry land of the wilderness than they begin to grumble; they are a confused and ungrateful lot.

The Biblical narrator, however, is not disturbed by their ingratitude, their murmuring or their caustic complaint. Ingratitude, after all, is a common human failing, and it may only be a passing emotional reaction to a new and more challenging environment than the predictable physical circumstances of Egyptian slavery.

They complain and demand food from Moses and Aaron; but for this Scripture is not wroth with them; they are quickly answered. They cry: "In the land of Egypt . . . we sat by the flesh-pots . . . we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill the whole assembly with hunger." But still they get what they want: "Then said the Lord unto Moses: 'Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you.'" Bread is not the issue. Nor is water. For when they next complain to Moses, saying: "Give us water that we may drink. . . . Wherefore hast thou brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?" they are not kept waiting for satisfaction. At once, the Lord tells Moses: "Thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink."

What obviously disturbs the narrator is the fundamental failure of the people to grasp the divine purposes of the exodus. For a moment, when they walked across the sea into dry land, they had grasped it. Then with Moses they sang, "The Lord shall reign for ever and ever." A moment later, glory has

² Exod. 15.

The Failure of Success

slipped from their grasp. Now they are not merely asking for bread and water; they are demonstrating that they have lost the meaning of redemption. They ask: "Is the Lord among us, or not?"³ To be sure, they have a right to be hungry. But their real difficulty is not caused by their lack of food or drink. It is their radical doubt, the denial of God's hand in their redemption, which has transformed their success into failure.

This misconception of the purpose of their redemption from Egypt is nowhere more bitterly exposed than in that powerful moment of paradox: Moses atop Sinai receiving the revelation whilst his people below dance before a molten calf of gold! Tragedy is blended with irony and scorn as the Text records their failure. They sacrifice to the calf, saying: "This is thy god, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt."

As the narrator understands history, the Israelites were redeemed for the sake of the revelation—the Law God would give them at Sinai. But look what success has done to them! With what are they willing to "make merry?" The very symbol of Canaan's idolatry—the Baal worship of bulls and calves—has captured their imagination on the eve of Sinai.

It is surely no accident that the spiritual failure of their success should be dramatically focused in the worship of an image which was to plague them in the future. When Israel finally arrived in the land of promise, instead of making it a holy land by purging it of Canaanite idolatry, for long years the people continued to retain affection for this bull-worship of the desert. "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." These thundering words of scorn hurled at Israel by the prophet

³ Exod. 17.7.

The Bible Is for You

Elijah reflect the spiritual schizophrenia which remained with the people long after they had settled the land. This is why the Text makes so much of their failure in the wilderness—on the eve of revelation, and in the wake of their redemption. One day they sang a song unto the Lord and, on the next, they danced before the calf. It was no momentary downfall, no passing aberration because of temporary physical discomfort. It was fundamental and long-lived.

The implication of the Text is basic and universal. Freedom from bondage is not a true or sufficient goal of nations. When it is tied only to political or economic goals, national liberty may very well lead to national idolatry. The higher success, the narrator seems to insist, is the recognition of the spiritual foundation of all freedom. When a people understands that, when it relates Egypt to Sinai, redemption to revelation, a sterile “freedom *from*” is transformed into a creative “freedom *for*.”

If the whole people can be singled out for criticism when it fails in the face of success, surely even would-be heroes can also serve Scripture's didactic purpose. The world may set great store by their exploits but the Bible sees them in a different light. Their stories are recounted in order to point up the vain and destructive ends which follow in the train of the wrong human pursuits. The all-too-human desire for honor is singled out as one of the most deluding and false values. This is the prime editorial consideration for the inclusion in the Bible of the biographies of both Jephthah and Samson—two successful failures, whose physical strength turns out to be a spiritual boomerang.

First, a word about the Biblical view of their times, the days of the judges. Bloodshed, lawlessness and violence were

The Failure of Success

widespread. Even the chieftains of Israel—the judges, as they were then called—were not known for their integrity, character or piety. They managed to retain their political prominence through acts of great military might and prowess which resulted, it was believed, from their possession of extraordinary physical powers and unique military skills. They were looked upon as special people.

But centuries later, when the Biblical story of the epoch was edited, we cannot avoid perceiving a tone of criticism in the Scriptural report, summed up best by the verse which recurs throughout the Book of Judges: "In those days there was no king of Israel, every man did that which was right in his own eyes." And what every man then considered right, it seems clear, the later Bible narrator considered wrong.

In this Bedouin-like society of the judges, honor plays a key role. But the Bible is at pains to show that honor in that religiously underdeveloped community was not a spiritual quality at all. Life was a constant battle, involving mortal combat, and honor was equated principally with valor in battle against Israel's enemies.

Small wonder, then, that the story of the lives of some of those heroes whom the Bible respected not at all should have been included in Scripture in order to demonstrate what was wrong, not what was right.

Jephthah, described laconically as "a mighty man of valor,"⁴ was banished from the house of his father and became chief of a warring group of freebooters who sallied forth in frequent raids. Later, his townsmen, the people of Gilead, sought him out to be their leader when war broke out between them and the Ammonites. He agreed and proceeded to ratify a pact

⁴ Judg 11:1.

The Bible Is for You

with them. He then seeks to resolve the conflict by an appeal for peace to the leaders of the Ammonites, but he is refused.

And now the irony of the Bible masterfully begins to come into play. The Text records: "Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead . . . unto the children of Ammon." Apparently, however, this new gift of spirit was not sufficient for Jephthah—he was determined to make an open and demonstrative bid for divine acceptance. In a desire to prove publicly his zeal for victory, and the lengths to which he was willing to go in order to retain divine favor, he offers a vow which can only astound the reader. One can almost hear the sound of mockery in the voice of the Biblical narrator as he quotes Jephthah's revealing promise: "And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said: 'If Thou wilt indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand, then shall it be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.'"⁵ This is "the mighty man of valor" speaking!

Jephthah, of course, succeeds in battle. But the storyteller has not finished the tale. He goes on:

And Jephthah came to Mizpah unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances, . . . And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said: "Alas, my daughter! *thou hast brought me very low, and thou art become my troubler*; for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back." And she said unto him "My father, thou has opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do unto me according to that which hath proceeded out

⁵ Judg. 11 29

The Failure of Success

of thy mouth, forasmuch as the Lord hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon." And she said unto her father: "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may depart and go down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions." And he said: "Go!" And he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed. . . .⁶

The text, of course, does not record this dramatic and tragic scene with the aid of italics. We have done so, however, because, without reading the italicized phrases with proper emphasis, the purpose of the narrator may be missed completely. When he made the vow, he must surely have been aware of the possibility that some animal or even some human being would be offered up as sacrifice. But now, face to face with his own child, this man of "courage," this human symbol of physical victory and success, does not tell his unwitting victim that *he* has brought *her* low, that *he* has become *her* troubler! His calculated risk has failed *him*, and he is now less concerned with her than with himself.

Had he been able to live with defeat and still believe that God was with him, he would not have needed to vow in the first place. Indeed, this is the very point the Text wants to teach: "the spirit of the Lord came over Jephthah." But that was not enough for Jephthah! He had to win in order to be sure that he really had the spirit! He knew, too, that his vow was both irrevocable and unconditional. But he had made it precisely because he hoped to be obliged to fulfill it.

⁶ Judg. 11 34-39.

The Bible Is for You

Keeping the vow—precarious as it might prove to be—would be testimony that God was on his side, because he had dramatically shown that he was on “God’s side.”

But Jephthah’s success is his failure. And what is most tragic is that he knows it. His daughter is not only his only child, she is also unmarried. Her death means Jephthah’s death, for in the Biblical mentality there can be no greater punishment than to be left childless and heirless. He inherited doom because he spoke more than he needed to speak. Victorious over others, he defeated himself. Perhaps the proverb found elsewhere in the Bible had Jephthah in mind, when it warned that “death and life are in the power of the tongue.”⁷

In the case of Samson, thinking back to his childhood encounter with the figure of a Biblical Hercules, the average reader retains a picture of a pathetic hero who was undone when his hair was shaved off by his treacherous wife Delilah. We tend to think of him as a man whose secret was “stolen” from him by an agent of the enemy. On closer scrutiny, however, the deeper and more pointed purpose of the narrator emerges: *Samson is the hero who was not a hero*. He is the powerful loser, not because someone took the secret of his strength away from him, but rather because he never understood that secret himself.

What was that secret?

In the life of ancient Israel there were various categories of religious leaders; in addition to prophets and priests there were also those known as Nazirites.⁸ The great prophet is sought by the Lord; he does not choose but is chosen to be a divine servant. The priest is born into a tribal, castelike

⁷ Prov 18.21.

⁸ See Amos 2:11–12.

The Failure of Success

group, and *must* serve. The Nazirite, on the other hand, takes his own vow, for a stated period or for a lifetime and, thereby sets himself apart from the rest of society, to serve as a consecrated religious leader. And this is the law of the Nazirite:

When either man or woman shall clearly utter a vow, the vow of the Nazirite, to consecrate himself unto the Lord, he shall abstain from wine and strong drink: . . . All the days of his Naziriteship there shall no razor come upon his head; until the days be fulfilled, in which he consecrated himself unto the Lord, *he shall be holy*, (italics mine,) he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow long. . . . All the days of his Naziriteship *he is holy unto the Lord*. . . .⁹ (Italics mine.)

The account of Samson's birth details the fact that he was to be a Nazirite, a very special Nazirite indeed. His mother is not permitted to drink wine or strong drink, must not touch unclean food. And Samson, who is destined to be a Nazirite for a whole lifetime, must not permit his hair to be shaved.

Nevertheless he does not consecrate himself to the service of his God and his people. He is patently indifferent to the life of destiny which had been assigned to him "to save Israel out of the hand of the Philistines." The great Nazirite turns out to be no Nazirite: he mistakes his divine powers and the blessing given him by the Lord and wantonly translates their spiritual significance into craven physical terms.

The Biblical narrator lays charge after charge against him, and builds up a bill of particulars like some skillful prosecuting attorney. The very first report of Samson is a bad one: he goes down to Timnah, a Philistine town, spies one of its damsels, and seeks to take her unto wife. But his parents re-

⁹ Num. 6 2-8

The Bible Is for You

monstrate with him: "Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?" Samson persists nevertheless. Whereupon the narrator lands his first ironical blow in what appears as almost a parenthetical comment: "But his father and mother knew not that it was of the Lord; for he [Samson] sought an occasion against the Philistines."¹⁰

In all that he is about to undertake, the narrator implies, Samson will be tested by God. Should a true Nazirite, one fully and totally consecrated, marry a Philistine woman? Should a real spiritual hero barter away his leadership by using marriage as a ruse and a mere tactical prodecure? That these questions should be answered in the negative is clearly evident from the way in which the story will end: It is Delilah, a Philistine wife later taken by Samson, who helps bring him to physical ruin. Even his tactics will fail, principally because he equated his Nazariteship only with tactical and physical advantage.

Not long after his first wrong step, we come upon the next. He tears a young lion "as one would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand." The carcass of the lion swarmed with bees, and Samson scrapes honey with his hands and continued on his way, eating as he goes. Arriving at a seven-day feast in Timnah, he finds the young men engaged in the parlor-games of those times—the telling of riddles. Samson wagered thirty suits of clothing that they cannot guess the answer to this riddle: "Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness." For three days they cannot "declare the answer." Finally, on the seventh day they

¹⁰ For the Samson story in the Bible see Judg. 13-16.

The Failure of Success

threaten his wife that unless she procures the answer to the riddle from her husband they will burn her, as well as her father's house. She entreats Samson, and Samson tells her the answer, although he knows that he should not, for he himself says: "Behold, I have not told it to my father nor my mother, and shall I tell thee?"

We can hear the mocking overtones of the Biblical narrator as he goes on with the story. Some Nazirite! Is this a man whose vows can be taken seriously? Is he able to guard his tongue from rashness? See what easy prey he is to the entreaties of a Philistine woman. He has justified his marriage to her in the vain belief that through her he will have opportunities to best her people. But see now what has happened to the hero. He has become the foil.

The "prosecuting attorney" continues to mount damaging evidence against Samson. His next argument takes this biting line of thought: If Samson does not understand the meaning of his Naziriteship as a spiritual calling, he is at least believed to be a man who can quiet the Philistines and thus help his people gain the advantage over their overlords. But apparently he is not capable of achieving real success, even as a political or military leader! He relies on his great strength to deliver the Israelites out of the hands of the Philistines; yet even this trips him up. The Philistines are incited to battle because of Samson's foolish and cruel pranks. He catches three hundred foxes, ties tail to tail, puts a torch between every two tails, and sets the animals running into the standing corn of Philistine fields. But this does not help his people. On the contrary: "the Philistines went up and pitched in Judah and spread themselves against Lehi." Far from rejoicing in him as a strong man who helps his people, the men of Judah are only too

The Bible Is for You

happy to be rid of him. They bind him up and turn him over to the Philistines. The purpose behind the introduction of this "evidence" into the record is clear: Samson not only misses the meaning of his spiritual powers; he abuses his physical strength to such an extreme that even his own people—and this is the nadir of ignominy—willingly hand him over to the enemy.

But the most crushing blow is saved for the crescendo of the climax. Even children know how the story ends:—Samson, "eyeless in Gaza," takes hold of two pillars of the Philistine temple and brings the house down upon their heads as well as his. "So the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life."

But why does the story end this way?

To understand the end, we should go back again to the beginning. Samson's parents, Manoah and his wife, were without children. They were visited by a divine messenger and promised a son who would be a Nazirite, on condition that his mother take similar vows. Yet nowhere in the story and nowhere in the promise of his birth is there any mention that Samson would possess superhuman physical strength because of the vows of Naziriteship. Nowhere are we told that his unshaven hair—one of the physical signs of the Nazirite—would endow him with magical powers of strength. Nowhere else in the Bible, moreover, do we encounter any other Nazirite whose vows to abstain from strong drink and not to shave his beard transform him into a man of physical might. How, then, had we gotten the impression that the secret of Samson's strength lay in his uncut hair?

The answer to this question is simple, though it is not always obvious to the casual reader. It is Samson—and Samson alone—

The Failure of Success

who believes this to be the secret of his physical strength. The divine messenger announcing his birth does not speak of this; his parents do not mention this; and the whole Biblical tradition, before and after, fails to regard the hair of the Nazirite as the source of physical strength. Indeed, if the hair of the Nazirite were traditionally regarded as the source of physical strength rather than a sign of religious consecration, everyone should have known about it—even Delilah. Only after Delilah persistently and relentlessly presses him to give her the reason for his great strength (and for the second time he is tripped up by a Philistine wife) does he finally tell her the secret. And when he does, he reveals to her what *he* believes a Nazirite is: "There hath not come a razor upon my head; for I have been a Nazirite unto God from my mother's womb; if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man."

So this is how Samson construed the meaning of the Nazirite vows! For him, his hair was the symbol of the powers of manliness and virile strength. Once removed, his might would also leave him. As long as he kept the external appearance of the Nazirite, he believed that the spirit of the Lord would remain with him. Thus, when the narrator describes Samson's awaking after being shaven and portrays his confidence that he would still shake himself from the Philistines as before, he ironically uses the language of *Samson's* false belief: God seemed to have departed from him now that his beard was shaved! Not until his beard began to grow again after he was shaven does he feel capable of calling upon the Lord to help him destroy the Philistines.

The great hero-who-never-was summons his strength to topple the building on the heads of the Philistine lords and

The Bible Is for You

worshippers gathered to sacrifice before their god Dagon. And the ironical eulogy brings his story to a close: "So that the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life."

His life was violent enough, his death even more so. His life was meaningless and confusing because he missed the significance of his religious vocation, but his death was even more pointless. He died a Nazirite who never was a Nazirite, for he never understood the meaning of *holiness unto the Lord*. He died without ever learning where to look for the real secret of true strength.

The achievement of the fathers, we have seen, is not applauded as a significant cause sufficient unto itself. Scripture gauges this only in terms of its effect upon the lives of children. For it is the long view in which the Bible is concerned. Its interest is not the Israelites who sang in their moment of victory, but rather in how they handled and interpreted their success in the years to follow. So, too, Jephthah and Samson, two who possessed but misused and misdirected divine favor, are measured in the light of their false standards.

Perhaps there can be no final or conclusive human success, for there are infinite possibilities which stretch beyond each momentary victory, and no one can be certain that the glitter of this day's gold will not become dim. Human vanity prefers to think otherwise, it likes to endow *personal* or *national* success with *ultimate* significance. Speaking in authentic Biblical tones, Jeremiah profoundly proclaimed Scripture's attitude toward the success that is failure:

Thus saith the Lord:

Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,

The Failure of Success

Neither let the mighty man glory in his might,
Let not the rich man glory in his riches;
But let him that glorieth glory in this,
That he understandeth, and knoweth Me,
That I am the Lord who exercise mercy,
Justice, and righteousness, in the earth;
For in these things I delight,
Saith the Lord.”¹¹

Only the absolute, the universal and the totally moral abide as permanent and ultimate. Man can only try to associate himself with these; he can never replace them by absolutizing himself. This is why the Bible suggests that he can never succeed altogether, and why, in virtually every Scriptural success, there is the hint or the echo of human failure.

And yet, as we shall soon see, hope does beckon to man. If success may not be considered ultimate, neither may failure.

¹¹ Jer. 9 22-23.

Endings That Are Beginnings

IN AT least three of the Bible's books, the endings seem to be artificially tacked on either as pious afterthoughts, as repetitious glosses or as unnecessary and boring genealogical data. They are anticlimactic, and mar the craftsmanlike unity of all that went before. At least, so say the *literary* critics.

Spiritually, things are otherwise. Just as the moral punch lines of the stories mentioned earlier may go unnoticed, and much of the message be lost through careless inattention, so the *total* religious message of *whole* books of the Bible often depends upon our ability to read them *to the very end*. For not until the end does the unique and telltale suggestion appear. It seems to say: this is not the end at all, it is but a new beginning! This moral optimism of the Hebrew Bible is particularly evident in the way in which the books of Job, Lamentations and Ruth end. Each of them deals with the problem of making a new beginning, each addressing itself to different subjects. Job speaks to the individual, Lamentations to the Jewish people, Ruth to the universal community of men. Let us look at all three.

Endings That Are Beginnings

Job

What meaning can man find in life, when, in spite of an earnest desire to make sense of it, vast human suffering makes it seem senseless?

This question forms the essence of an old, old tale, and is deeply imbedded in the early folklore of the Jewish people. Age after age, as each generation focused upon the inevitable problems of human existence, the ancient story of a man called Job was recast and refashioned. Finally, the Book of Job found its way into the Hebrew Bible as a consummate summary of the various answers to this profoundly perplexing matter.

Religion is sometimes its own enemy, for it often freezes the fresh insights of one generation into the congealed doctrines of the next. These ideas are stanchly cherished and defended as hard-won truths, and zealots in every age and place fight to the bitter end, often with fanatical devotion, to maintain the authority of the past. One cannot fully appreciate the Book of Job without recognizing that it was put into the Bible in order to point to the way of human *experience* over the frozen *dogma* of an earlier day. The book, as we now have it, emerges from that existential battleground where dogma and human experience clash. This is what makes Job vital and classical; it is the rich distillation of the conflict of the ideal with the real.

In the eighth century before the Christian era, Israel's prophets proclaimed that faith in God was a human necessity if men are to believe in justice, for God rules the universe according to His law. The prophets, in their time, were bat-

The Bible Is for You

ting to overthrow the dogmas of previous generations, the product of an earlier orthodoxy. They were not anticlerical, but on one pivotal religious issue they were radically divided with the established priesthood. These new teachers of God were passionately trying to undo doctrines which supposed that the moral side of religion was of secondary account and that Temple ritual, animal sacrifice, incantation of the sacred liturgy, bringing of gifts to the altar, public display of "divine philanthropies" were the true hallmarks of the righteous man. Despite misunderstanding and public abuse, the prophets succeeded in reshaping the past: God was now worshiped as a God of justice, the Author of the moral law. Ritual was reinterpreted, if not replaced; the essence of religion became faithfulness to the law of God as the way of the good life.

Some centuries later, Ezekiel, in the exile of Babylonia, took this principle of his prophetic predecessors and refined it even more. He went beyond Amos and Isaiah. In effect he said: *He who sins will himself be held* responsible; the older belief which taught that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children is wrong! Ezekiel transformed religion into an individualized matter, preaching personal responsibility for one's own misdeeds. What he said was not easily accepted either, for he, too, was in open revolt against an older doctrine which proclaimed that the sins of the past are responsible for our downfall.

By the fourth century B.C.E., however—the time the Biblical book of Job was probably edited—Ezekiel's belief had become an acceptable doctrine among Jews, the belief that God rewards with material blessing those who live a virtuous life, and punishes sinners with the suffering they have earned by their own hand. Clearly, it was held that since God is a God

Endings That Are Beginnings

of justice, man must be just; if man is unjust, he must suffer the consequences of his injustice.

A writer of the fourth century—one who must have suffered deeply himself—now comes along and attempts to reinterpret the meaning of sorrow and ordeal. He took the older Semitic myth of Job—the popular story of a man who had suffered and who was punished, who repented and then was doubly rewarded—as the basis of his book. The older story said: if you suffer there is reason, not because of the sins of your fathers, but because of your own sins. But if you repent, and come back to God, God will return His blessing to you!

The man who wrote this newer interpretation of suffering used the older myth, although he was obviously not satisfied with what the old myth taught. He, like Archibald MacLeish in our day, questioned the dogmas of his time, and in much the same way that prophets four hundred years before him had challenged the accepted doctrines of their own age. He added new ideas and conceptions which reflected the thinking of his own times—and this is the book we now have in our Bible. Satan is introduced into the story by the new author to ask the basic question he wants answered: "Does Job fear God for naught?" The author is seeking to determine if there is anyone who is disinterested enough to believe in God and not desire the rewards of his faith. Would Job be so profoundly religious if he had not hoped to be blessed with prosperity because of his goodness? Would he still be true to God if he were to lose his material possessions, his children, even his health? These are his key questions, and the author is obviously looking at the problems of life and the function of religion in ways different from those his teachers had taught him.

The Bible Is for You

MacLeish utilizes three symbols in his *J.B.*, each meant to represent popular "comforters" of our day: the psychiatrist, the social philosopher and the clergyman. Yet none of these seems capable of offering solace to J.B. In the Biblical book, Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, repeatedly take up Job's complaint, and in each case seem only to reiterate accepted religious platitudes—no more successfully than MacLeish's trio. What do Job's friends suggest? They ask: Do you know why you suffer? You suffer because God wants you to learn how to discipline yourself, suffering is a moral schoolmaster. You are not wholly just before God. As no man is completely just, so no man can fully comprehend His ways. Accept your suffering, then, without tears or lamentation and learn to refine your nature.

When Job hears this, he turns upon his would-be friends in hot anger: Is this your comfort, he scoffs? Why must God chasten me in order to teach me? And as he turns upon them, he reveals a "shocking" display of irreverence—shocking, to his friends, at least. But we can understand him, for who has not rebelled against God in an hour of personal sorrow, when the world loses meaning, the sun goes down and the light is extinguished in our hearts? If we refuse to question, in the midst of anguish, we retain a naïve piety. If everything goes our way and we enjoy the comforts and luxuries of life without hindrance, we can afford to remain pious. Job asked questions which his friends could not answer because *they were not suffering*; they could not even ask his questions, no less answer them. They glibly offered pious platitudes, the facile words of men who do not stand in the fearful boots of their fellows. Job cannot understand them, nor does he seem willing to listen.

Endings That Are Beginnings

The author uses this conflict as a vehicle to attack the conventions and platitudes of the religion of his day—the religion which taught that if you are just, God will be just to you, but if you sin, God will mete out the punishment due you. But Job asks: Why does God create man so frail, so capable of sin, and then proceed to punish him for being only what He made him? Why does not an all-powerful God use His omnipotence to achieve justice in the world? If He destroys the righteous and the wicked alike—making no moral distinction between the two—how then, can I, mere mortal man, make the distinction between right and wrong? And why should I choose the right, if God does not? Job's friends see the reasons for his suffering in Job himself; but Job, the suffered, seeks the reason not in himself, but in God.

The Hebraism of rational belief cannot answer these questions in the form of neat theological formulae. Otherworldly mystics might say: the more you suffer now, the easier your existence in the world yet to be; the more your soul is refined by torture now, the purer its state in the next world. This world is as nothing, they might comfort him; this life is but a narrow "corridor" leading to the great and eternal "living room" of Paradise.

If any did suggest such a snug faith to Job, he must surely have rejected it, for he finds no solace in a possible theological bliss in a material hereafter. "Man," he says, "that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and withereth; He fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not."¹ No doubt there have been many in the past who endured torture and physical pain only because they were able to believe that because of their suffering they would

¹ Job 14 1-2.

The Bible Is for You

inherit eternity. Such a belief helped keep them strong, gave them power to undergo great physical hardships. But Job was not able to believe in this, any more than many moderns can explain suffering in terms of a spiritual *quid pro quo*—a bargain made now for what is to be offered later.

The author obviously points his thinking in another direction. In the thirty-eighth chapter the denouement of the book is to be found; here, and in the two chapters which follow, are the high points of the work. God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, and yet, instead of answering Job's questions only poses a new series of dilemmas. God's answers do not purport to "explain" Job's suffering; instead, they constitute a vindication of the universe in spite of it. Clearly, even God will not explain the meaning of hurt and anguish as things in themselves outside of the context of the total picture of life. There is *evil* in the world, but if man is to be mature he must learn to live with these mysteries, just as he naturally accepts the mystery of order and design.

Thus, God plies Job with questions:

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea?
By what way is the light parted,
Or the east wind scattered upon the earth?
Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts?
Or who hath given understanding to the mind?
Who can number the clouds by wisdom?
Or who can pour out the bottles of heaven,
Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lioness?
Or satisfy the appetite of the young lions . . .²

² See Job 38.4 *passim*.

Endings That Are Beginnings

The purpose of these questions is to put the problem of Job's suffering in cosmic perspective, to make him understand what he really is: a speck in a far-flung universe, in a world created not only for him. Job finally understands the paradox of the human situation and replies: Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer Thee? I lay my hand upon my mouth."³ But while God sought to teach Job humility, humility alone will not do. "Gird up thy loins now like a man,"⁴ He tells Job; this is the climax of the author's purpose. Here, then, is both the tragedy and the triumph of Job—of every man. We are made to realize that we are but clods on the earth, atoms in a world transcended by God and a mighty universe. We understand now that God has not attacked Job, because so to believe would put him at the center of the universe. In passionate self-centeredness he had thought that the world revolved about him; now he understands that in the sight of the ages he is as nothing, and that what befalls him is not of major consequence—to time, eternity or the universal rhythm of life. This is the tragic side of human destiny—the self-recognition of our human unimportance. But there is also triumph. Job has also heard God tell him: "Gird up thy loins now like a man." He has it within his power, if he learns to be a man, to go beyond the limitations of suffering.

Man, the author suggests, becomes more fully human when he recognizes that suffering is written into the very law of nature. If he seeks to exploit religion as *the* answer to suffering, even God Himself refuses to speak to him. Levi Yitzhak of Berdishev correctly understood the essence of the religious question when he addressed God in the midst of his own hurt,

³ Job 40.4.

⁴ Job 40 7.

The Bible Is for You

pleading. "I do not ask You, God, *why* I suffer. I ask only *that I suffer for Your sake!*" Suffer we must, for life is fragile and we are but humans. Piety does not protect us from cosmic harm; it only prevents us from self-pride. It must be embraced for its own sake—some might add, for God's sake—or it cannot be piety. Understanding this helps mortal, creaturely folk transcend their hurt to become spiritually mature men.

The orthodoxy of Job's time, and perhaps the orthodoxies of our own, often lead men to believe in a self-rewarding religion, a faith in gifts repaid. But men need to understand that righteousness requires neither special rewards nor the approval of our fellow men, ultimately, it rests upon the witness of our own conscience. Job is satisfied in the end, in spite of his suffering, because he realizes that God has not withdrawn from him, that suffering is not a punishment for unrighteousness; it is part of the mystery of life and no man is free from pain and hurt. Bitter and painful though it be, we must not flinch before this law of life; we must gird up our loins as men. While we seek justice for ourselves, our suffering must lead us to contemplate the pain of the whole world, not only our own world, but the acute mysteries of life itself. A tremendous gift comes to us when we are given life and, even if we cannot fathom its deepest secrets, we need to be grateful for every breath. God is the Author of life and this is His ultimate justification.

By what moral right do we seek self-satisfactions? Is there an end to the desire of man, a boundary to his craving? If we are given ten years we want twenty, fifty and we "demand" seventy. What may be justice for Job may not be justice in the eyes of Job's friends; what may be the answer to the problem of one individual or one nation may contribute to the

Endings That Are Beginnings

destruction of another. Who then can truly understand the complexity and the riddle of life?

Is this a weak answer? Hardly. It is a tough answer, not a soft one. Maturity, we are told, requires that man cultivate the ability to live without all the answers and still not destroy himself. This is a powerful definition of religion, and this is the kind of religion Biblical Job teaches. Job teaches that high religion can not purport to give men the answers to all of life's difficulties, for often God hides His face from us. What is more, the answers are not nearly so important, Job's author suggests, as the way in which we undertake to live with the problems. "Gird up thy loins now like a man"—live with the paradox, transcend its confusion, its pain and its distress—this is the lesson we need to learn.

It is, of course, much simpler for a clergyman to stand in a pulpit and pontificate. It is much easier to enter a house of mourning and offer pie in the sky to those bowed down with grief. But, in truth, a mature belief does not expect God to give answers; instead, we must be ready to live with the eternal, unanswered questions: Where were you when the universe was created? Have you taught Nature its mysteries? Do you know the deepest secrets of life?

When man attempts to play God, he dons his canonicals, his clerical robes and speaks pontifically. He ends up speaking like God but acting like a fool. The Book of Job is a mature response to life, for it gives an answer that is really a question. This, in fact, is the ultimate wisdom—the recognition that the question and the way we live with it is spiritually more significant than the vain belief that we have found all the answers.

On this note the Book of Job concludes. Yet no sooner do

The Bible Is for You

we reach its religious climax—and one would have expected nothing further but silence—when the mood is broken by an artistically superfluous epilogue, which may even be the work of a later, pious editor:

So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she-asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters . . . And after this Job lived a hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, even four generations. So Job died, being old and full of days.⁵

But from the Biblical point of view, not the artistic, the epilogue is necessary, it is neither trivial nor superfluous. The last lines of Job give the clue: individuals suffer torment, the world of their making collapses, but God's world is filled with new options for beginning again. *Beginning again*—in addition to all of the religious instruction already given in the chapters which preceded the last lines of the book—this supreme moral teaching about man's new possibilities has been waiting to be heard. At the very end it is announced: man is never doomed to total eclipse! Job's end becomes a new beginning.

Lamentations

No man in his right mind would wittingly tempt fate by breaking the laws of nature. Take the law of gravity. Whether you live in Asia or in America, when you fall, you can only fall down, not up. The law operates objectively for everyone,

⁵ Job 42 12-17.

Endings That Are Beginnings

everywhere. Nature's laws, we must remember, are not invented by man; they are only discovered by him.

This is what the prophet Amos had in mind when he told his people that, just as there is no escape from the law of nature, so there is no escape from the law of morality. Both were promulgated by the same Creator. Remember how Amos put it. He said:

Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? . . .

Will a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where there is no lure for it? . . .

Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord hath not done it?

Put into the terms of our day, Amos was saying something like this: We respect the laws of nature because we can easily see their immediate, obvious consequences. But the laws of good and evil we regularly forget because we think that they can be overlooked and that we can get away with it. Some insincere critic of religion once said that the Ten Commandments are not so important as the Eleventh Commandment, and the Eleventh Commandment, he quoted as being, "Don't ever get caught!"

We never get away with anything. Every cause has its effect. We pay heavily for the things which we think we can avoid. Whether we are caught or not by others, somehow we get caught ourselves, caught in the meshes of our own undoing.

Amos, and all of the prophets of Israel, made this teaching the cornerstone of their religious message. If evil befalls the people, it is not because they have disagreed over what constitutes goodness, but rather that they have failed to find good ways to achieve good things. Never, they exhort, can we ride hell-bent for heaven.

The Bible Is for You

The urgent, dire and repetitive message of the prophets was virtually always focused on the singular symbol of national pride and strength—the Temple on Zion's hill. If Israel hearkened to the law of God and kept their part of the covenant, all would go well with them. If they followed after the false gods, and thus the false *ways*, of their immoral, idolatrous neighbors, the sanctuary which Solomon had erected to the one true God would be reduced to ashes and rubble, their land taken from them and they would go into remote exile.

The prophetic warnings had not been heeded by the people. In the year 586 before Christianity, Jerusalem was captured. Before the Babylonian soldiers entered the city of David, Zedekiah the King, together with his soldiers, sought to escape the capital City in a daring nighttime adventure. In the plains of Jericho the enemy overtook him and brought him captive to Riblah, Nebuchadnezzar's headquarters. There he was forced to witness the horrible slaughter of his sons and other royal princes. Then, degraded and brokenhearted, he was blinded and callously shipped off to a Babylonian prison cell for the remainder of his life.

But even as the prophets had spoken of doom, so were they bearers of a message of comfort and consolation. Israel might sin and suffer, but, since they were as much the prophets of Israel as they were messengers of the Lord, in Israel's travail they suffered, too. With one hand they condemned; with the other they consoled and placated.

This side of the prophetic nature makes plausible the traditional view that it was Jeremiah the prophet and no other who, as eyewitness to the pillage and destruction of Jerusalem, wrote the moving dirge and the painful description of the end, in what has entered the Bible as the Book of Lamentations.

Endings That Are Beginnings

The work is written anonymously, but is obviously the keen report of an eyewitness, one whose sense of compassion for his people was deep and abiding. In time, it was referred to as the lamentation of Jeremiah—for the people of Israel saw the spirit of prophecy, that hand which consoles and appeases—shining through its pages in love.⁶ For the very prophets who do not fail to admonish Israel that her misdeeds will lead to banishment from her land and exile to remote places are those who know how to comfort her. God's covenant with Israel, they teach, is an everlasting covenant. They prepare the way for Israel's return to Zion, if the people will make a *new beginning* by turning to God. The eyewitness writer presents the terrifying scenes of the famine, the haunting cries of babies for food and drink, the frightening sight of faces black and withered from suffering, and the unspeakable horror of mothers eating the flesh of their own children:

The tongue of the sucking child cleaveth
To the roof of his mouth for thirst;
The young children ask bread,
And none breaketh it unto them. . . .
They that are slain with the sword are better
Than they that are slain with hunger. . . .
The hands of women full of compassion
Have sodden their own children;
They were their food. . . .⁷

⁶ The Hebrew version—the original—is written anonymously and is not even ascribed, in the text itself, to Jeremiah. The Greek translation, however, prefaces the first chapter with the following words "And it came to pass, after Israel was led into captivity and Jerusalem laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said." . . .

⁷ Lam. 4.4f

The Bible Is for You

The scenes of horror continue. The dire prophetic warnings against departing from God's word find their mark in the finale:

The crown is fallen from our head;
Woe unto us! for we have sinned. . . .
For the mountain of Zion, which is desolate,
The foxes walk upon it. . . .⁸

But a new beginning is still possible for the people of Israel. The prophet's purpose is to warn, to admonish, and, if need be, in a time of destruction to comfort his people. But above all else his supreme contribution is a belief in regeneration and in the very last verse it is proclaimed: "Turn Thou us unto Thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned; Renew our days as of old."⁹ "Renew"—this is the key word upon which the whole of the book hangs. The prophet does not shut out the possibility of beginning again. Job taught this truth, speaking to the anxious heart of the individual; Lamentations, too, addressing the destroyed people offers them a live, group option: Begin again!

The moral optimism of the Hebrew Bible, here as elsewhere, emerges at the very close of this book. All that has preceded the last verse has been in the nature of a slow build-up to the moral climax of the book. Turn to the true way of righteousness, turn to the word of God. The end is no end; it can be a beginning! The dirge and the lament give birth to life and hope.

⁸ Lam 5.16f.

⁹ Lam. 5.23.

Endings That Are Beginnings

Ruth

Until the very close of the Book of Ruth, a tale of exquisite beauty and supreme literary charm, one would hardly suspect the religious motivations which led to its incorporation into the canon of the Bible. For not until the reader reaches the last of its lines does he surmise that it is more than a story of Ruth's personal loyalty, and the great reward which follows the tragic circumstances of her young life. But more of this in a moment. First, let us trace the narrative line.

Following the death of her husband and her two sons in Moab, where they had married Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth, Naomi makes up her mind to return to her native place, the town of Bethlehem. Ruth insists upon returning with Naomi, to leave her kith and kin, to stand by her side. Her words of sweet loyalty and devotion still live on as a classical, imperishable statement.

And Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."¹⁰

Arriving in Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest, Ruth goes at once into the fields to glean after the reapers. She comes to the fields of Boaz; he invites her to glean only in his fields and instructs his hands to deal kindly with her.

¹⁰ Ruth 1:16-18.

The Bible Is for You

Naomi learns of her good fortune and rejoices, for Boaz was one of her near kinsmen. When the harvest was ended, Naomi had her plan ready and Ruth obediently carries it out. Following the joyful harvest meal, Boaz goes to sleep on the threshing floor; to his surprise, he discovers Ruth lying at his feet. He treats her with honor and promises to do his duty as a kinsman, if no closer relative will claim her.¹¹ She returns home to Naomi laden down with rich gifts. The next day Boaz offers the kinsman's privilege of buying Naomi's field to the other relative, but the latter refuses, after learning that, in addition, he must also marry Ruth. Then, amidst the joyous felicitations of the people, Boaz takes Ruth unto himself as wife, and, in due course, she bears him a son, and the grateful and happy Naomi becomes the child's nurse.

Thus far, a pleasant, romantic, pastoral idyll. But now the closing lines, and in them the moral support for the entire structure:

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab, and Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon; and Salmon begot Boaz, *and Boaz begot Obed; and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.*¹² (Italics mine.)

No lesson is appended, no patent moral attached. The artistry of the author is supreme: he makes his point by merely reciting a dry genealogy. But what a list!

King David—symbol of the messianic dynasty, the vaunted

¹¹ This is a reference to the levirate marriage, described in Deuteronomy 25:5f, whereby a kinsman is required to marry the childless widow so that the name of the deceased man "be not blotted out of Israel."

¹² Ruth 4:18-22.

Endings That Are Beginnings

ruler of Israel, the beloved of his people—from whence does he stem? From the despised stock of Moab! This is the universal moral lesson of the author. All that went before served only as introduction to his theme: In the past, Moabites were to be avoided—"because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt." Along comes Ruth, the Moabitess, serves her Israelite mother-in-law "better than seven sons," gleans food for her and helps to nourish her in her old age. What greater love hath any woman!

The older memory is transcended in the newer experience: the unpleasant Moabites give rise, through Ruth, to the greatest of all Biblical kings. Without the pointing of fingers or bombastic moralizing the key point is clearly made. A new beginning—and Ruth is its symbol—can be made on top of the past, a beginning which can divert men from their hates toward a greater victory, of which David, the Messiah-king, is the symbol. From Ruth, David the King!

All three books—Job, Lamentations and Ruth—when viewed only in a natural, literal light may point in different directions. But, as we have noted, the greatness of art lies in its evocations, not merely in evident meanings.

All three books lead inexorably to similar conclusions, conclusions rooted in the soil of common faith. They confront the pained individual, the maimed people and the divided communities of men, echoing the words of the Psalmist: "Lead me [O Lord] to a rock that is too high for me."¹³ Men are exhorted to stand on tiptoe, to strain their moral fiber, to endeavor to become what they were not—for man, the Hebrew Bible teaches, is never totally eclipsed.

¹³ Psalms 61 3.

The Bible Is for You

One teacher caught this penetrating mood when he said that all of life was created only to teach man the religious truth that he must learn to make new beginnings. Commenting on the first verse of Genesis, he taught "‘In the beginning’—this means, *for the sake of the beginning*," for the sake of man's beginning and rebeginning, God created the heaven and the earth. The opportunity to start again, to turn toward God, is always open to man.

This is what makes all of these endings beginnings.

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Index

Abraham, 73, 74, 75, 77, 121, 125, 126, 139, meaning of name, 113-15

Abraham ibn Ezra, rabbi, 58

Adam, 114, meaning of name, 111-13

Adler, Alfred, 70

adults, and Bible, 8, 96

America, influence of Bible in, 39-45

Amos, 165

Apocrypha, 10-11

Aramaic, language, 18, 19, 22n

archeology, and the Bible, 47-54, 93

atheism, 77-78

Baal, worship of, 122-23, 141

Babylonia, 3, dispersion of Jews in, 15, 16, 17, 156

Bible, as art, 32-33, 86, attitudes toward, 48, books of, 8-9, 13, 15, 18, brothers in, 129-37, Christian versions of, 22-26, codes of, 94; commentaries on, 26-34, contradictions in, 58-63, criticisms of, 59-60, 65-66; dualism in, 79; editions of, 63-64; fathers and sons in, 120-28, heroes in, 7; imperative of, 76; influence of, 35-46, intention of, 31; moral optimism in, 154-72 (*see also* moral teaching, morality), omissions in, 56-58, 75, origins of, 3-4, 12; revelation in, 68, sacred character of, 5-6, 13-14, 28,

translations of, (Aramaic) 12, 20, (Greek) 12, 13, 20-22, (Latin) 12, 22-23, (Syriac) 12, 22; what it is, 3-14, wisdom of, 86-91. *See also* myth, names.

Buber, Martin, 65, 69, 71-72, 138

Canaanite culture, 4

Christian service, 17

commentaries, Biblical, 26-34. *See also* Bible.

conflict: in human nature, 130-37; with Nature, 129-30

confrontation, Biblical, 68-69

Council of Trent, 1546, 11, 23

Creation, the. *See* Genesis.

David, 73, 125, 126-27, 170-71

Dead Sea Scrolls, 12, 13, 49

Delilah, 148-49, 151

democracy, and the Bible, 43-44

dualism, Biblical, 78-79

Egypt, and the Jews, 4, 48, 72, 74, 102, 116-17, 126, 139-41

Eli, 121-22

empathy, Biblical, 69-70

English language, and the Bible, 37-40

Esau, 98-99, 129, 131

Essenes, 12

- existentialism, and the Bible, 65-72
 Exodus, the, 139-41
 Ezekiel, 10, 156
 Ezra, 9, 15, 17
- faith, 67-68, 90-91, 135, 155; and
 Job, 159, language of, 90
 Five Books of Moses *See* Law.
 Freud, Sigmund, 96
 Fromm, Erich, 76, 96, 103, 136
 fundamentalists (literalists), 60, 65-66
- Genesis, 61-64, 73, 78, 86-90
 Gideon (Jerubbaal), 122-25
 God: concepts of, 125, 155-57, 162;
 and the Exodus, 139-41, in Gen-
 esis, 29-30, and Jacob, 132-35, and
 Jephthah, 143-46, and Job, 157-60;
 and Jonah, 103-5, and love, 105-6,
 and man, 8, 79, 87, 135 (*see also*
 confrontation), and Moses, 135-
 36, purpose of, 73. *See also* faith,
 revelation.
 Graf-Wellhausen theory, 58-60
- Hagiographa. *See* Writings.
 Hebrew language, 18
 Hebrew Scriptures *See* Old Testa-
 ment.
 heroes, Biblical, 7, 73, 138, 146
 higher criticism, 59-60
 history Bible as source of, 35, 72, 94,
 116, 138, and Moses, 7, spiritual,
 27-28
- intertestamentary writing. *See* Apoc-
 rypha.
 irony, use in Bible, 138
 Isaac, 74-75, 77, 98, 114, 121, 125, 129
 Isaiah, 74
 Israel, people of in Babylonia, 15, 16,
 17, customs of, 108-9, under David,
 127, as idolators, 122-23, 141-42,
 God's covenant with, 167-68, as
 "people of the Book," 27-28, and
 Scripture, 5. *See also* Exodus, his-
 tory, Jacob, Jephthah, Josiah,
 names, Ruth, Solomon.
- Jacob, 73, 92, 102, 126, 129, and
 Rebecca, 97-101, his struggle with
 God, 131-34
 Jammia, 10, 11
 Jephthah, 142, 152; and God, 143-46
 Jeremiah, 152-53, 166
 Jews, of Alexandria, 20-22. *See also*
 Israel, people of.
 Job, 154, 155-64
 Jonah, 92, 103-5
 Joseph, 73-74, 92, 129, moral mean-
 ing of, 101-3
 Josiah, 53-55, reforms of, 15-16
 Jotham, 123-25
 Judaism and Christianity, 12
 judges, the, 42-43
- King James Bible, 23-25, 37
- Laban, 99-101
 Lamentations, book of, 18, 154, opti-
 mism of, 164-68
 Law, the (Pentateuch), 8-10, 20, 28,
 58, 76, reading of, 15, 16-17
 Leah, 100-101
 love, need of, 105-6
 Luther, Martin, 23-24, 28, 33, and
 Hebrew canon, 10-11
- MacLeish, Archibald, 157-58
 Masoretic Text, 11-13. *See also* pre-
 Masoretic versions.
 Midrash, 27, 34
 Midrash method, 29-32
 moral punch line, Biblical, 92-106
 moral teachings, Biblical, 94-95, 97
 morality, Biblical, 89-90
 Moses, 6-7, 10, 17, 27, 39, 48, 58, 73,
 74, 125, 128, 135, 136, and God,
 139-41, meaning of name, 115-18
 mothers and child naming, 108-9
 myth, and the Bible, 48, 66-67, 94
- names, Biblical, 41-42, 107-19
 Naomi, 169-70
 Nazirites, 146-52
 New Testament, 11, 17, 22, 59, and
 Apocrypha, 10

- Noah, 3, 48, 52-53
- Old Testament, 59, and Apocrypha, 10-11; authoritative text of, 11, reading of, 15-19
- Pentateuch. *See* Law.
- Peshitta, 22
- Pharisees, 19n, 28
- Philistines, 147-50
- Philo, 12, 18
- pre-Biblical writings, 3-4
- pre-Masoretic versions, 12 *See also* Dead Sea Scrolls
- prophets, the, 155-56
- Prophets, the (Writings), 8-10, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, 76, 166
- Protestants, and Apocrypha, 11
- psychology, and the Bible, 72-81
- rabbis: and service, 19-20, as teachers, 27, 29-30, and the Writings, 10
- Rachel, 100-101
- Ras Shamra. tablets of, 4
- realism, Biblical, 26-27, 68
- Rebecca, 92, and Jacob, 97, 101
- "received text." *See* Masoretic Text
- redemption, Biblical, 72-73, 141, 142
- religion: as art, 86, and individual, 156, and insight, 155, and Job, 158-59, meaning of, 163; moral basis of, 76-78, 79, and orthodoxy, 162
- revelation, 142; in the Bible, 65, 68
- Roman Catholic Church, 22n, 23; and Apocrypha, 11
- Ruth, book of, 18, 154, 169-71
- Sadducees, 19n, 28
- Samson, 142, 146-52
- Samuel, 121
- Saul, 126
- scientist, the, and the Bible, 48-49; and reality, 87-89
- Septuagint, 20-22
- Simeon, 6-7
- Solomon, 56-57, 125, 128, mines of, 57-58, Temple of, 15-16, 28, 56, 166
- success, failure of, 138-53
- suffering, and destiny, 160-61
- synagogue, readings in, 15-18
- Talmud, the, 11, 17-18
- targeman*, 19
- Targum, the, 20
- Ten Commandments, 94
- "Ten Words," the, 6
- theologians' attitudes of, 93-94
- theophoric names, 109-10
- Tillich, Paul, 65, 66-68
- Torah. *See* Law.
- translations, Biblical: Aramaic, 12, 20, Greek, 12, 13, 20-22; Latin, 12, 22-23; Syriac, 12, 22
- Ur of the Chaldees, 3, 51-53
- western culture, and the Bible, 35-45
- wisdom, Biblical, 86-91
- Woolley, Sir Leonard, 52-53
- Writings, the (Hagiographa), 9-11, 17-18, 22, 76
- Zusya, rabbi, 125-26

